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Exile
&
Exile of the Self

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Foreword

Exile and Exile of the Self was originally a conference organized by the Department of Italian at the University of California, Los Angeles which was held November 12-13, 1993. This particular volume of *Carte Italiane* is out of the ordinary insofar as it is the publication of the proceedings of the conference. After months of consideration and reflection the organizational committee chose *Exile and Exile of the Self* based on two thematic currents. On the one hand, it was our desire to solicit papers addressing exile in its political and cultural dimensions. On the other it was intended as an invitation for papers addressing exile in a more existential arena, for example, the very act of writing as a means of self-imposed exile. The papers published here are testimony to the richness and variety of literary themes which the notion of "exile" was able to provoke.

Richard Collins & Glenn Lawse
Editors-in-chief

Napoleon and Other Pimps in *Le confessioni d'un italiano*

In the beginning of *Le confessioni d'un italiano* Ippolito Nievo's protagonist seeks to "ingenuously" impart the "moral" of his life, that it might be useful to others "che da altri tempi son destinati a sentire le conseguenze meno imperfette di quei primi influssi attuati." Despite or perhaps because of such an ingenuous beginning, critics have often overlooked Nievo's greatest novel. Even ardent supporters of Nievo's work such as Folco Portinari have labeled it "un romanzo di giovinezza," focusing exclusively on its youthful excesses. Others such as Marinella Columni Camerino focus on the multiplicity and heterogeneity of the text, noting that such multiplicity is consistent with the diversity of Nievo's own literary production. And while any reader of this novel must agree that it possesses incredible width of scope, before it might be productive to consider the pluralistic and divergent tendencies of this text, it might be useful to consider to what extent it does have unificatory and linear tendencies.

After all this is a novel whose protagonist proclaims to write "ingenuously" and to impart a "moral." Any reader acquainted with the numerous adventures of the text will realize that what this moral might be could benefit from clarification. Many critics I suspect have been sidetracked by the obvious answer that the novel is a fiercely patriotic proponent for the unification of Italy and a somewhat liberal democratic government. But it is hard to understand the text fully when one cannot fully understand the obsessive moralistic refrain which resounds throughout its course. The protagonist has an ambiguous and independent political stance and ideology, an ideology which while apparently traditional is not. The text describes the two great careers of Carlino Altoviti's life, that of an itinerant revolutionary and Italian patriot, and his passionate relationship with the love of his life, the Countess Pisana of Fratta. In the course of these two trajectories, the narrator will interrupt with a persistent, almost repetitious moralistic refrain on the need for proper education and social organization, specifically lamenting the manner and nature of Pisana's upbringing. For many readers digressions into lecture are perhaps the most unpalatable aspects of the novel. Who taught Carlino to be such a busybody? If there was

anything precocious and alarming about Pisana's temperament and behavior in her childish games that Carlino never suffered to interpret as innocent, his sentiments seem doubly so.

One must understand that *Le confessioni* seeks to provide a map or guidebook to those born into the modern world, a world where feudalism is remembered nostalgically as a forever lost youth, where modernity is represented as an unsatisfactory adulthood. These memoirs recited at "voce alta" are desperately trying to convince themselves as to the truth of their own events and the verity of the conclusions drawn from them. In this respect the novel fits tightly among its generic models such as Rousseau's *Confessions* and *Le ultime lettere di Jacopo Ortis*. Like Rousseau's work it perverts a genre normally reserved for the admission of guilt to establish the protagonist's innocence. Carlino's story is so densely permeated by the conventions of its genre that at the end of his life he blatantly asks for the absolution sought by nineteenth century confession novels. "Ed ora che avete stretto dimestichezza con me, o amici lettori, ora che avete ascoltato pazientemente le lunghe confessioni di Carlo Altoviti, vorrete darmi l'assoluzione?" (Nievo 909). From such evidence one can perceive the text's own conception of its aim or teleology. But in keeping with the tradition of confessional narratives, the rules of which permit the confessee to seek maximum exculpation with a minimum of confession, before pardoning our friend the narrator, we owe it to ourselves to understand exactly what we are pardoning.

Lacan tells us that "the first object of desire is to be recognized by the other" (31). We should understand that this text is permeated at many levels by desire: it is the story of the desire to be loved; the desire for a social order free from enemy invasions, bad government and internal unrest; the fundamental desire for economic security; finally it expresses desire for an order or meaning in reality which reconciles the frustration of the above mentioned impulses. All of the latter desires are subservient to the former, the primal desire of the subject to be recognized. In Carlino we see this as his political beliefs and career begins when he seeks to sublimate his passion for Pisana. It is of course natural that through narrative we come to terms with the gap between our own desires and the reality of the external world. As Hayden White points out, narrative appeals to a basic human instinct and is remarkably suited to act as an interface between human reasoning and reality.

> What wish is enacted, what desire is gratified, by the fantasy that **real** events are properly represented when they can be shown to display the formal coherency of a story? In the enigma of this wish, this desire, we catch a glimpse of the cultural function of narrativizing discourse in general, an intimation of the psychological impulse behind the apparently universal need not only to

> narrate but to give to events an aspect of Narrativity.
>
> If we view narration and Narrativity as the instruments by which the conflicting claims of the imaginary and the real are mediated, arbitrated, or resolved in a discourse, we begin to comprehend both the appeal of narrative and the grounds for refusing it. (4)

Carlino's *confessioni* provide just such a mediation between the imaginary and the real, and present themselves as a meaningful interpretation of events, not only of the character's life, but of the events of his eighty years. White points out that narrative invites the reader to a shared interpretation of reality, and in this respect the text poses a contract with the reader, offering a satisfaction in the form of **meaning**, but subversively requires the reader to accept hidden terms.

The experiences of Nievo's maturity are a never ending symbolic youth, a career of permanent displacement in a disordered environment. Franco Moretti explains, the very concept of youth has its origin in social instability.[1] Youth must be the period in which the individual seeks his proper role in society, and the discovery of a proper fixed and stable position represents in its own right a happy ending to the individual's narrative. The *Bildungsroman* is the narrative form which reconciles a populace with the social upheaval of the industrial revolution, and creates a mental space and moral ground to accept a world that is constantly in flux. While Carlino eventually finds personal prosperity in a career as a shipping merchant, as long as Venice is ruled by a foreign government his life has a transitory character to it by his own definition. Carlino's life is emblematic of the modern reality that along with the disappearance of a traditional childhood sure of repeating the successful careers of one's ancestors, one also can no longer expect to find any fixed or stable role in the new socio-economic order. One need only think of the many careers Carlino tries his hand at, or the change in fortunes of the boy turning the spit who enjoys prosperity at the end of the novel, while the successors to the powerful Conte di Fratta subsist on a diet of coffee. The octogenarian's life thus represents the trend mentioned above by Moretti; the dislocation from countryside to the city, the need to reposition oneself with regard to the new industrial modes of production sweeping through Europe. Moretti's analysis ties the model for personal life to the trends of historical development, an analysis which we will see is especially applicable to Nievo.

During the collapse of Saint Mark's Republic Carlino becomes Secretary of the new Municipality of Venice. Our protagonist's career parodies in many ways that of his mentor's, the brilliant Lucilio. The fiendishly clever doctor like Carlino has only one true love in his life, and a revolutionary passion with which it is inextricably intertwined. Lucilio is bourgeois and can never aspire to marry Clara while she is a member of the Venetian aristocracy. In the novel he single-

handedly hastens the demise of the feudal regime, not merely because of his deeply rooted ideological beliefs, but to consummate his singular passion. But while Lucilio outsmarts himself and places Clara forever beyond his reach when she joins a convent, Carlino is too distracted and awkward to seek Pisana's hand while it is obtainable, and thus cedes her to marry S. E. Navagero. Carlino is always simultaneously attracted and repulsed by Pisana, motivated by sexual and egoistic impulses to replace the affection of the mother he never knew, and he never wants what he can have.

This simultaneous repulsion and attraction runs parallel to the tension between youth and maturity, and is also the origin of that tension. Like Lucilio, Carlino finds his life centered around his relationship with a woman, or more to the point his inability to reconcile himself with her affection. Carlino can never commit himself to Pisana, and he can never reject her. He is forever horrified by the prospect that she might be unfaithful to him, but it is this very prospect that attracts him to her. Carlino Altoviti provides an interesting variation on the theme of the man who must separate women into two categories. On the one hand he seeks a woman who provides a pure and chaste affection, representing a maternal figure in the mind of the subject. Incest taboos prohibit the subject from desiring sexually the maternal figure and the subject's rivalry with the paternal figure also motivates the subject with the wish that his mother were pure and chaste. On the other hand the subject's sexual impulses drive him to seek a figure appropriately impure to provide an outlet for such impulses. In effect the subject wishes to violate the maternal figure's chastity and be her protector.[2] While some might find Freud's analyses simplistic or misogynistic, arguably it provides a useful key for decoding Carlino. Ideally Carlino would be able to find both his sexual outlets and nurturing affection in one source, one woman, as less severely neurotic individuals manage to do. Yet he is never able to reconcile the two extreme personae, and thus consistently insists on the dual volatile nature of Pisana.

The orphan who grew up in the absence of a mother was not ignorant of the nature of familial relationships, for like most marginal figures he was all the more keen an observer. More than most people he felt the need to find a mother substitute. For that reason when he was capable of marrying Pisana he felt no interest, but rather when she was betrothed to S. E. Navagero, a man old enough to provide a paternal rival to Carlino's affections, he "feels all the stars of the firmament collapse on his head." It is a clear moment of Epiphany in his affections for Pisana.

> Confesso che l'amore della libertà, l'ambizione e tutti gli altri grilli, ficcatimi in corpo dalla generosità della stessa mia indole e dai raggiri di mio padre,

> fuggirono via, come cani scottati da un rovescio d'acqua bollente. La Pisana mi rimase in mente sola e regina; mi pentii, mi compunsi, mi disperai di averla trascurata per tutto quel tempo, e m'accorsi che io era troppo debole o viziato per trovare la felicità nelle grandi astrazioni. (Nievo 459).

Carlino had ample warning from Pisana's mother that she was an eligible bride, and had on more than one occasion sought to interest him in marriage. The transformation in Carlino's affections is instantaneous when she is no longer eligible, confirming the applicability of the Freudian hypothesis.

Many commentator has remarked that in many respects Carlino fails to ever mature, and from a psychoanalytic perspective it is true that he never overcomes his neuroses with respect to Pisana. Why is it that throughout the novel Carlino describes Pisana, from her very infancy, with regret towards her sensuality, her flirtatiousness and her independent character that refuses to be tempered or disciplined? He himself admits that his reflections on Pisana's youthful inclinations and moral character is greater than is "alla comune dei moralisti" (Nievo 53). If one can forgive the excesses of youth, what exactly are the grounds for accusing her of a delinquent career that was lamentably prepared for by an improperly supervised youth, and moves him to never tire of the maxim "bisogna coglierli giovani." The fact is that for all Carlino's jealousy and suffering during his adolescence with Pisana, his anxieties about her character amounted to naught.

> La domanda è dilicata; ma dilicatissimo è l'obbligo di rispondere. Come potete credere, una piena malleveria io non vorrei farla per nessuno; ma in quanto alla Pisana io credo fermamente che suo marito l'ebbe se non casta certo vergine sposa, e tale la lasciò per la necessaria ritenutezza dell'età canuta. Sia stato merito suo o della precoce malizia che la illuminava, ci sia entrata la fortuna o la Provvidenza, il fatto sta che per le mie ottime ragioni io credo così.
>
> (Nievo 534-35)

To be less delicate and much more frank than our narrator, Carlino had very good reason to believe that Pisana was a virgin when she married S. E. Navagero as she later lost her purity when she lived alone with him in his father's house. If anyone is to blame for her alleged corruption, and her juvenile excesses were the only flimsy evidence for such corruption, it would be Carlino himself, her first lover. The fact that she managed to remain pure until her relationship with Carlino does much to absolve her from any accusations: unless there is some other item nagging at Carlino.

The real dilemma, and the problem which provides the origin for Carlino's narrative, is not what Pisana's character as a child may have been; rather the

narrator's anxiety responds to her transgressions as an adult. Carlino depicts Pisana's career as an ever more precipitous flirtation, progressing from tea parties as a five year old, to crushes on Giulio del Ponte and Lucilio as an adolescent, and to her brief affair with Ettore Carafa, Carlino's commanding officer in the Cisalpine army. Yet Pisana's loyalty to Carlino often proved equal if not greater than his own to her, and that might be the definition of the problem at the core of Altoviti's narrative. Folco Portinari and other critics give little attention to Carlino's episode in London, where he has been exiled for his part in the uprisings of 1820. Suffering from cataracts acquired during his imprisonment in Naples, his death sentence is commuted to life imprisonment and forced labor and then, again due to the intercession of Pisana and the Principessa Santacroce, he is freed into exile. Completely dependent on Pisana who has followed him to London to care for his health, he is forced to live off what she can earn for them in London due to his debilitated condition. Pisana sets about the formidable task of learning English and then proposes to teach Italian as a means of supporting them both. Alas Carlino writes of the high cost of living in London, where both food and rent cost them dearly; this is the center of the industrialized world at that time. Pisana is not able to make ends meet. In her indefatigable search to provide for both, her health worsens, and Carlino, completely helpless, feels that she is slighting him in her comportment towards him. Their on-again, off-again relationship as lovers had ceased with his marriage (at her request) and he could not even experience that solace in their suffering together.

Thus it is much worse in London than the siege of Genova. Even though in that episode of their relationship the economic conditions were much more extreme, when it was Pisana whose health suffered, Carlino was able to provide for her alimentary needs. It is interesting to compare that in those circumstances Carlino contrived to obtain a cat to make soup for her through the help of their common friend Alessandro, valiant colonel and erstwhile miller's son. In this comic episode Alessandro had a landlady that was quite enamored of him, and by luring her with sexual advances he is able to steal her cat for Carlino. In the most extreme of economic conditions one is constrained to exploit sexual taboos for material needs, but in this case our narrator is completely unabashed.

Yet another case of economic extremity forces Carlino to avail himself again of the resources of Alessandro's landlady, in a manner of speaking, this time in Milan after he had resigned his post with the government of the French occupation. This time the exploitation of sex for economic purposes is done directly by Carlino, whose amicable relationship as the majordomo of the Countess Migliana is greater than professional motives require.

> Ma dopo cinque e sei giorni cominciai ad accorgermi che la Pisana non poteva avere tutto il torto ad ingelosire della mia signora padrona. Costei usava verso di me in una tal maniera che o io era un gran gonzo o m'invitava a confidenze che non entrano di regola nei diritti d'un maggiordomo. Cosa volete? Peccai. (Nievo 703)

Carlino is rather more ashamed of this part of his career when he finds out that Migliana is a woman who has brushed his life before, a reactionary opportunistic agent who consorted with the most unsavory characters. These digressions serve to contrast the double standard by which Carlino measures his loyalty against Pisana's.

In London Pisana is absent from their apartment for long intervals seeking to earn what little money might make a difference in their living conditions, and Carlino has grave misgivings as to her activities of which she reveals nothing. Certainly she has been unable to find students in Italian (a sad commentary on the lot of teachers, and especially in this profession) but she assures Carlino that she is hiding nothing from him in her absences. Nonetheless he notes the exhaustion with which she returns from these absences, and becomes seriously alarmed when her health deteriorates enormously. After her first bout with illness and her apparent recovery she insists on again returning to her efforts to provide for the two of them, and it is then that she meets Doctor Lucilio on the streets of London. Their old friend who has become a prosperous doctor in London immediately provides for them, and after beginning the cure of Carlino's sight and bringing Carlino's family from Venice, rebukes Carlino for his coldness with respect to Pisana. Carlino felt slighted by the manner in which she had taken care of him, but Lucilio tells him in a heated exchange that he cannot know at what extremes she had suffered to nourish him.

> -Tacete, Carlo; ognuna delle vostre parole è un sacrilegio.
> -Una verità, volevate dire.
> -Un sacrilegio, vi ripeto. Sapete cosa faceva per voi la Pisana quand'io l'ho incontrata pallida estenuata cenciosa per le vie di Londra?
> -Sì . . . orbene? . . .
> -Tendeva la mano ai passeggieri! . . . Ella accattava, Carlo, vi accattava la vita!
> -Cielo! no, non è vero! . . . È impossibile!
> -Tanto impossibile che io stesso le porgeva non so quale moneta, quando. . . . Oh ma vi posso descrivere quanto provai nel ravvisarla? . . . Come dirvi il suo smarrimento ed il mio?
> -Basta, basta! per carità, Lucilio; la mente si perde, e vengo meno di dolore volgendomi a guardare dove siamo passati! (Nievo 780-81)

It is significant that Carlino has been blind during the course of his life, and it

is too painful for him to look back on where he and his life companions have passed. Contemplation will reveal that this is the action of the whole novel. While the histrionics of this exchange between Lucilio and Carlino are not atypical of Nievo, and it is lamentable that a Venetian noblewoman should beg for her living, the excess of Carlino's reaction indicates an omission of sorts. It requires no great suspension of disbelief to imagine exactly how Pisana begged for her living, nor must we believe that at some forty years of age illness caused by malnutrition and melancholy took her from this world, as the narrator would lead us to think. It is interesting to speculate where in the text the omission lies, whether it is Carlino who alters the facts of the story or whether Lucilio edits the tale as he does not wish to admit that he was on the verge of hiring Pisana for her services before he recognized her.

After her grievous death by venereal disease Carlino returns to Venice and establishes himself as a successful businessman, for the first time in his life providing for his economic success. Yet the evident trauma of his life in London leads him to some repression. When Raimondo Venchieredo begins some unpleasant gossip in the cafés Carlino is forced to challenge him to a duel where he emerges vindicated. But what provokes Carlino so much?

> -Sono tanto vangelo! -ripigliò calorosamente Raimondo.
> -E già v'immaginerete qual era il mestiero da cui la Pisana ritraeva i suoi guadagni. . . . Una donzella veneziana non ne sa molti, me lo consentirete. Or dunque bisogna fare di necessità virtù. . . . Ad onta de' suoi quarant'anni l'era così bella così fresca, che ve lo giuro io, molti anche non inglesi sarebbero rimasti accalappiati. . . . L'amico Carlino poi sapeva tutto e pappava in pace. . . . Eh, che ne dite? eh! che buon stomaco! . . . Peraltro, lo ripeto, bisogna fare di necessità virtù! . . . (Nievo 820)

Carlino insists on describing Raimondo's talk as pure calumny, but it seems much closer to the truth than his own account. His aggrieved outrage also goes a long way towards explaining his characterization of Pisana throughout the narrative. It is for this reason that one must believe that our narrator was traumatized by her prostitution in London, and was subsequently wracked by guilt and remorse. From his view he could be considered an accomplice in her own destruction, or the cause of it, and in part he needs to shift responsibility from his relationship with her to their historical condition, such transference having the additional benefit of partially absolving her as well. His relationship with Pisana, the one true love of his life in spite of everything, is so central to his confessions that he needs to absolve himself, and imply that Pisana's degeneracy was innately motivated by her own personal defect born of a promiscuous childhood. In Carlino's mind she is so tainted by the actions to which she was

forced by life's extreme conditions that he must find some meaning, some overarching cause linking the actions of their maturity with their youth. It is not enough for him that in extreme conditions people could be forced to actions which they wouldn't otherwise consider. Thus it is this need to compensate for Pisana's actions in London that creates the central theme of the novel and motivates the moralizing tone and theme that weaves throughout the text. To reduce Fredric Jameson's ideas of the political unconscious to a smaller scale, Carlino's text responds to a question that can never be directly posed, i.e. what could have been done to prevent Pisana's degeneracy.

But to fully understand how the double helixes of Carlino's life intersect, the personal relationship with Pisana and the public career of a patriot, we must see how the answer of the text to the question posed by Pisana's death is also the answer to the parallel question of history. History in *Le confessioni* is not merely a charming romantic backdrop to the torrid passions of a boy from the Veneto. History is the question to which the text responds in the strictest Jamesonian sense, and it is a parallel question simultaneous with that of Carlino and Pisana's love. To recognize this we must remember that Pisana is not the only woman to suffer a tragic death in the novel. Like most representatives of the confession genre, the life of the long lived protagonist must read like a long war epitaph, a roll call of the multitude of characters who have died during its course. Pisana is representative of a melodramatic family tree in which the women have tragic fates, and it is with specific remorse that Carlino remembers the fate of Pisana's grandmother, the Contessa.

In Carlino's feudal youth, the Contessa was a very real relic and symbol of the declining political order, having once been with her husband a member of Louis XIV's court. In heavy symbolism her death is the result of the revolution which toppled the French order she had once participated in. It occurs when Carlino had gone to Portogruaro to seek the aid of Venetian troops to defend the castle of Fratta from the oncoming Napoleonic troops in the year 1796. Being sidetracked by a bread riot in town he returns later than he should have in the evening, to find the castle and its environs already thoroughly sacked. He races into the castle, totally deserted of its inhabitants, and fears for the condition of the Contessa, a frail woman of a hundred years. He finds her conscious in her dying state, badly beaten and abused by the French soldiers in the worst and most degrading manner, as she exclaims the indignity of her death and bitter renunciation of the faith that had sustained her "finora."

Carlino was at this point a young revolutionary idealist, and her renunciation of her religious faith is not such a severe blow to his own, but rather to his political faith. To prove that there is a political justice, if not a divine one, he seeks redress to the almost divine authority of the French commander, Napoleone Buonaparte.

He is in effect able to obtain a personal audience with the young Napoleone, but not the trial of the soldiers at fault. If natural modesty and charity were to incline us to dismiss the possibility that the Contessa was not the victim of rape at 100 years of age, we cannot have any doubts when Carlino tells Napoleone that "le cose . . . sono della massima importanza e della maggior delicatezza" (Nievo 413). Altoviti is the victim of a snow job: Napoleone rails on about the provocation provided by the Venetian authorities, and how whatever indignity a poor woman might have suffered must be understood as occurring in the context of a higher cause. Essentially Napoleone is not interested in weakening the morale of his troops in the pursuit of discipline. Carlino accepts Napoleone's snow job for the glory of his political faith, in much the same way that Lucia would accept Fra Cristoforo's doctrine of Providence.

Carlino's *Bildungsroman* consists of his subsequent disillusionment with Napoleone and the ideology that liberty could ever be provided by an external force. One of the many great traumas of Altoviti's life is the Treaty of Campoformio, where Napoleone traded Venice to the Austrians in return for the secure possession of the Low Countries. Not only was this demeaning to Carlino as a Venetian and an Italian, to have his fate decided arbitrarily by an outsider, but especially given all the great efforts that Carlino and his coconspirators had made to introduce the French troops into Venice peacefully in the name of Liberty. Such Liberty had proven to be the gateway from one servitude to another, and his sense of regret and shame were only heightened by his lack of activity during the crucial month that he remained secluded with Pisana in his father's house in Venice during the transition from the one government to the other. When Carlino is finally set on the Via Maestra by the pursuit of the Austrian secret police, his final glimpse of Venice on the boat leading him into exile echoes and even parodies Manzoni's "Addio ai Monti."

> O Venezia, o madre antica di sapienza e di libertà! Ben lo spirito tuo era allora più sparuto e più nebbioso dell'aspetto! Egli svaniva oggimai in quella cieca oscurità del passato che distrugge perfino le orme della vita; resta la speranza, il lungo sogno dei dormenti.
>
> Parricidio, parricidio! gridano ancora gli echi luttuosi del Palazzo Ducale. Potevate lasciarsi addormentare in pace la vostra madre che moriva, sulle bandiere di Lepanto e della Morea: invece la strappaste con nefanda audacia da quel letto venerabile, la metteste a giacere sul lastrico, le danzaste intorno ubbriachi e codardi, e porgeste ai suoi nemici il laccio per soffocarla!
>
> (Nievo 522)

This invocation to Venice reveals Carlino's personal guilt for his role in the transference of his *patria* to its traditional enemies the Austrians. Indeed one

could argue that Altoviti foolishly accomplished more through his naiveté for the Austrian cause than his lifelong enemies Raimondo Venchieredo, Avvocato Ormenta, Padre Pendola, la Contessa Migliana and many of the other Austrian agents he was to continuously face.

But the essential message is not merely his personal regret and self-accusation, but rather the parallel between the end of the Venetian Republic and the death of Pisana's grandmother. While prosopopeia is traditional in patriotic literature, it approaches allegory when juxtaposed with the death of the Contessa. For like the Contessa di Fratta, "Venezia si destò raccapricciando dalla sua letargia, come quei moribondi che rinvengono la chiarezza della mente all'estremo momento dell'agonia" (Nievo 488). We must understand to whom Carlino refers when he says "those" moribunds, as the simile exactly describes the rape of the Countess, including the role of Napoleone personally. For the last part of Carlino's invocation to Venice ends thus:

> Il Direttorio e Buonaparte ci tradirono, è vero; ma a quel modo si lasciano tradire solamente i codardi. Buonaparte usò con Venezia come coll'amica che intende l'amore per servitù e bacia la mano di chi la percote. La trascurò in principio, la oltraggiò poi, godette in seguito di ingannarla, di sbeffeggiarla, da ultimo se la pose sotto i piedi, la calpestò come una **baldracca**, e le disse schernendola: -Vatti, cerca un altro padrone! (Nievo 553, emphasis mine)

Napoleone is thus twice figuratively through his troops the sexual abuser, once to the Contessa and a second time to Venice personified and feminized. Carlino holds himself responsible for both deaths, and this is the true cause for the nostalgia and regret that flavor the novel which has been the subject of debate by so many critics.

The three deaths of Venice, Pisana and her grandmother intersect of necessity for they exist in synchrony in the mind of the narrator. As Barret J. Mandel explains in his essay "Full of Life Now";

> [P]ersonal history is put forth in a certain light. The past may be an illusion, but the light of now is never an illusion. What it illuminates, it makes real. **Now** is the only source of light. Anything it shines upon may be clarified. The image of one's personal history in autobiography is simultaneously in time and timeless, like Yeat's golden nightingale or like the image of a boy with a horse in Lincoln Steffen's autobiography. (65)

The memories of Carlino are of many great losses and fantastic failures, not all of which can reasonably be said to be his responsibility. Carlino grew up into a world in which he had already suffered the loss of a mother and a father. He regained his father as an adult only to lose him a second time. As Stephen

Spender writes, the subject lives in a naked solitude, "the expression of such naked solitude may be just what he wishes to avoid" (117). The *Confessioni* are the expression of such a solitude, the exile in which Carlino lives and all individuals possess as their birthright. This figurative exile is also the real story of his life. He cannot express it directly however, for the abyss is to great for him to stare in the face.

Rather than believe that his life consists of arbitrary events, Carlino seeks to unify them under a single roof, the arch of his narrative. The keystone in the arch whose weight the novel supports, is historically the Treaty of Campoformio. Before and after the keystone in the arch are the death of the Contessa and Pisana. These personal crises are linked to Napoleone's betrayal of Venice through the simile of sexual exploitation, through the words "la calpestò come una baldracca." As readers we can thus understand the urgency in the narrator's voice, and the underlying motivation for the composition of his autobiography. While it may be argued that a text composed of such varied historical and personal events can only be arbitrarily composed around a single central point, we can only respond that the text demonstrates that it conceives of itself as such in its obsessive return to its "moral." This moral is his response to the issue that haunts Carlino in his old age, his response to the ghost of Pisana. For each time he returns to his moral it is a response to the return of his ghosts. At the end of the catharsis of his memoirs, Carlino concludes:

> O primo ed unico amore della mia vita, o mia Pisana, tu pensi ancora, tu palpiti, tu respiri in me e d'intorno a me! Io ti veggo quando tramonta il sole, vestita del tuo purpureo manto d'eroina, scomparir fra le fiamme dell'occidente, e una folgore di luce della tua fronte purificata lascia un lungo solco per l'aria quasi a disegnarmi il cammino. Ti intravvedo azzurina e compassionevole al raggio morente della luna; ti parlo come a donna viva e spirante nelle ore meridiane del giorno. Oh tu sei ancora con me, tu sarai sempre con me; perché la tua morte ebbe affatto la sembianza d'un sublime ridestarsi a vita più alta e serena. Sperammo ed amammo insieme; insieme dovremo trovarci là dove si raccolgono gli amori dell'umanità passata e le speranze della futura. Senza di te che sarei io mai? . . . Per te per te sola, o divina, il cuore dimentica ogni suo affano, e una dolce malinconia suscitata dalla speranza lo occupa soavemente. (Nievo 911)

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Notes

[1]Franco Moretti, *Il Romanzo di Formazione* (Milano: Garzanti, 1986) 11: "Nelle 'communità stabili'—nelle società di status, o 'tradizionali'—'l'essere giovani' si realizza solo nella differenziazione biologica": così Karl Mannheim. Il giovane, qui, è un non-ancora-adulto, niente di più. La sua gioventù ricalca passo passo quella dei suoi avi, e lo introduce ad un ruolo che gli preesiste e gli sopraviverà: non prevede, ancora Mannheim, una 'entelechia' sua propria. Non ha una cultura che la contraddistingua e la valorizzi in quanto tale. E, potremmo dire, una gioventù **invisibile**, e **insignificante**. Poi la società di status inizia a crollare—le campagne si svuotano e le città crescono, il mondo del lavoro cambia volto con straordinaria e incessante rapidità. La socializzazione incolore e quasi inavvertita cui metteva capo la 'vecchia' gioventù diviene sempre più improbabile: si trasforma in un problema, e rende problematica la gioventù stessa." In a way it is possible to look at these confessions as a *Bildungsroman*, for by the end of the text our narrator has arrived at a perspective where he can resolve the internal conflicts of his desires; by proposing a culture of perpetual youth where the rigidity of maturity is opposed with the fervor of revolution. This is the appropriate mental space necessary for an industrial culture legitimized by a perpetual race forward to some future ideal.

[2]Sigmund Freud, *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*, ed. Philip Rieff, 1st ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1963) 50-51: "1. The first of these conditions of love must be described as quite specific; wherever one discovers it one may look out for the presence of the other features belonging to the type. It may be termed the 'need for an injured third party'; its effect is that the person in question never chooses as an object of love a woman who is unattached, that is, a girl or an independent woman, but only one in regard to whom another man has some right of possession, whether as husband, betrothed, or near friend. In some cases this condition is so peremptory that a given woman can be ignored or even treated with contempt so long as she belongs to no other man, but instantly becomes the object of feelings of love as soon as she comes into a relationship of the kind described with another man. 2. The second condition is perhaps a less constant one, but it is no less remarkable. The type I am speaking of is only built up by the two conditions in combination; the first condition seems also to occur very frequently by itself. The second condition is thus constituted: a virtuous and reputable woman never possesses the charm required to exalt her to an object of love; this attraction is exercised only by one who is more or less sexually discredited, whose loyalty and fidelity admit of some doubt. . . . By a rough characterization this condition could be called that of 'love for a harlot'."

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Madness as Exclusion and Self-Exclusion in Mario Tobino and Dino Campana

During the oral presentation of this paper at UCLA on November 13, 1993, I showed a series of slides that I reproduced from Matteo Collura's *Perdersi in Manicomio*. The photographs in Collura's book were shot one or two years ago in what remains of the mental hospital of Agrigento, Sicily. Psychiatric hospitals were abolished in Italy in 1978. The people portrayed in the photographs—real people—are "left-overs"; they should not be there. As the title of the book says, they got lost at some point along the way. It was not my intention to make a point with the slides, rather I simply utilized the disheartening images to convey some of the ineffable pain and loneliness of the dweller in the universe of madness and its holy *locus*, the asylum.[1]

This paper was born from an interest in the role played by madness in literature. My interest in madness, however, is not primarily with its private or interior aspect, but with madness as already processed, so to speak, by institutions, as inscribed in the circle of public acknowledgment. This leads almost naturally to the world of psychiatric hospitals. The two writers I consider here, Mario Tobino and Dino Campana, have in common that they both spent good parts of their lives in psychiatric hospitals—in different capacities, though. When Tobino started his medical practice as a psychiatrist in the hospital of Ancona in 1939, Campana had been dead for seven years, having spent the last twelve years of his life as an inmate of the asylum of Castel Pulci.

The contraposition of the public roles of these two writers, the first a director of a mental hospital for more than twenty years, the second an institutionalized madman, is at the core of this paper. Yet their contraposition falls apart as soon as one approaches these two men, not through their public personae, but through their work. Our expectations tend, surprisingly, to be overturned. Not only are the two writers strikingly similar in their anguish, loneliness and human drama; but Tobino often displays the disorientation one would not expect of a mental health professional, and Campana the lucidity and self-awareness one would not expect of a mental patient.

Deciding whether to attribute insanity to a person is necessarily problematic when it involves the deployment of categories completely different from those in operation at the time of that person's life. The intervention of hospitalization makes things even more tangled, because it augments the pretense of objectivity. It is important to notice that this can work both ways. There is a danger that mental health professionals might be protected from a certain kind of scrutiny, while having been hospitalized even once constitutes a stigma that is hard to erase.

Campana was institutionalized at least nine times (his biography has a number of grey areas).[2] Four times he was put in jail, five in a mental hospital. Before 1968 in Italy admission to mental hospitals was only compulsory and it was recorded on the patient's documents, so that he or she lost his or her civil rights. According to the 1904 Giolitti Law, dangerousness was necessary for admission (De Girolamo 22). Campana got himself into trouble quite frequently: he had outbursts of rage and acted violently and impulsively. But there is not one single record of his having hurt either himself or other people. The diagnosis of his first hospitalization at the age of 21 is "dementia praecox." The justification is "impulsività e vita errabonda," and excessive use of coffee; in fact, the literal translation of the medical report is "coffee-abuse" (Turchetta 67-8).[3] Vagrancy, coffee-abuse and fundamentally harmless outbursts of rage were the grounds of his other four admissions to mental institutions. All the imprisonments were brought about by either analogous causes or by lack of valid documents.

Campana showed early in his life a strong tendency to wander away from home. In his native Marradi he felt constricted, especially since his oddity provoked the jests of his fellow villagers. The various incarcerations exacerbated his isolation, pushing Campana to longer and longer flights and more and more trouble. It is impossible to express a judgment now on whether his problems had a psychological or even an organic cause, but a series of social, political and economic circumstances (Campana came from a poor peasant family) certainly contributed to his public definition as insane. An interesting datum: the years between 1874 and 1913 witness the Italian version of the phenomenon called by Foucault "the great internment." In those years, the inmate population increased from about 12,000 people to over 40,000, with a three-fold increase in hospitalization rate, from 5 to 15 for every ten thousand people (De Girolamo 22). Campana fits right in.

Campana wrote only one book, the *Canti orfici*. The book was published in 1914, when the poet was 29. Four years after the publication of the *Orfici* Campana was committed to a mental institution for the last time and spent there, in silence, the rest of his life. According to Gianni Turchetta the relationship of madness and writing in Campana is one of mutual exclusion. In defiance of all

the myths built around the figure of the poet, Turchetta claims that Campana did not write the *Orfici* **because** or **as** crazy, but **in spite of** his spreading insanity. According to Turchetta, Campana's poetry was the result of a relentless struggle with his insanity, as if the lucid reason that produced the lines of the *Orfici* had had to tear each of them from the hands of delirious hallucinations.

I would like to view the *Orfici* not as the calm before the storm, nor as a depiction of the "still sane" Campana, nor as portrait of one particular phase of his life (the phase, in fact, that preceded his sliding into madness). I would instead like to view the *Orfici* as containing the man in his entirety, engaged in the struggle to express his true self. From this perspective, in the *Orfici* we meet Campana both prior to and after his last and definitive internment. The *Orfici* speak, not only for the still active and public Campana, but also for the incarcerated and silent one.

I will focus here on only a few of the themes of the *Canti orfici*. The themes I have chosen are the ones that most strikingly have a counterpart in Tobino. I will try to analyze them synoptically, in order to evidentiate the similarity of themes in their works, but especially the overturned way in which they appear when juxtaposed. I believe that this overturning points in a direction that frustrates the expectations of the reader. I will try to show the vacuity and inapplicability of the stereotypes associated with madness, on the one hand, and sanity, on the other. The sanity we speak of in connection with Mario Tobino occupies a very privileged position in the collective imaginary, because the psychiatrist is precisely the person who **cures** insanity and is therefore immune from its manifestations. Once again, I want to make clear that I am not making any claim about the mental health of either Campana or Tobino. What I am interested in are the expectations, the perceptions, the myths derived from their biographies and especially from the roles they perform in the public rituals and representations of madness.

From the perspective of this paper, there is not much to say about Tobino's life.[4] For a couple of decades, he was the director of a psychiatric hospital, the hospital of Maggiano, which is renamed in his most famous novels as Magliano. Before the reform of 1978, which abolished mental hospitals, the director of an asylum had absolute power. In some cases he was the only physician working in the hospital, while the rest of the personnel consisted of nurses also performing the function of security (Tobino 1963, 10). He was in charge of everything: from admissions to discharges, from any form of medical intervention to disciplinary decisions, from hygiene to management of the personnel, etc. (Ferrario 198 and 202). I will focus on *Le libere donne di Magliano*, first published in 1953.

The key theme of the *Canti orfici* is the theme of travel. Travel, restless movement, is felt by the poet as an invincible compulsion. He has to be constantly

on the move, whether on foot, on a train, or in the hold of a ship. Travel is often associated with the terminology of doom: "destino fuggitivo," "andar fatale," "l'eterno errante." Lucidly, Campana attributes to his mental disturbances this deep restlessness: later on in the book he is asked by a friend to leave with him. He declines. His madness, "la sua pazzia," is "tranquilla," and is leaving him alone (Campana 78). There is obviously something deeply painful, deeply tragic in all this wandering. Campana describes it as "la malinconia dell'eterno errante." His travels do not lead anywhere. Every point of arrival is necessarily also a point of departure. There is no god to be found anywhere:

> Sotto le stelle impassibili, sulla terra infinitamente deserta e misteriosa, dalla sua tenda l'uomo libero tendeva le braccia al cielo infinito non deturpato dall'ombra di Nessun Dio. (71)

On the other hand, however, there is a deep element of joy and vibrating excitement in all this travelling. The tragic and the intensely joyful do not contradict nor erase each other. They are two sides of the same coin. Many critics have noticed that the *Orfici* is not a bleak work. The word "dolce" appears so often that it cannot fail to be viewed as a leitmotif.

The experience of the traveller is full of intense, almost intoxicating sensations. Sensations of every kind, but especially visual sensations, described with the obsessive accuracy of the subject who feels the enormous responsibility to be faithful to himself, impregnate the book. Colors explode from its pages: not pastel colors or delicate hues, but primary colors in their purest vividness: red, white, blue, green, black. It is not chance that the art of painting plays such a part in the intertextuality of the *Orfici*. This intense experience of life—we cannot take it to be of anything else—is simultaneously a full immersion in the realities of pain and joy. They are so inextricably linked that it is impossible to experience one without the other. And still, except in some deeply melancholic passages, it is joy, beauty and sweetness that the *Orfici* communicates. The high point of this intoxicating joy of living is expressed in the "meravigliosa . . . dolce e terribile," mysterious and pure union with nature achieved by the narrator of the "Pampa" (71).

The boundless physical experience of the world of the poet of the *Orfici* contrasts with the immobility and seclusion of Tobino's psychiatrist. Although a free man, he lives in the hospital. His home must amount for quite a while to a single room, because it is only later on in *Le libere donne di Magliano* that he recounts excitedly the moment in which two rooms are given him. Most of the descriptions contained in the book concern what goes on inside the hospital. The landscape within which the narration expands is comprised of the wards full of beds, the bare, terribly dismal cells of the dangerous and restless patients, and

of the enclosed lawns and courtyards in which they are sometimes allowed. The life of the doctor does not have much wider boundaries. It is mostly from his window that he observes the nature that surrounds the hospital. Also, he truly does not go anywhere. When he needs a bottle of wine from the inn on the other end of the hospital, he sends a meek and cooperative patient. His excursions seem to go no farther than the little room where the receptionist works.

Although immersed in a wonderful, sensual, vibrating nature (waters run and wind blows everywhere), the poet of the *Orfici* is alone. The stars are hugely distant in the imperturbable stillness of the sky, the sun scorches the land but cannot warm the poet, the rivers flow on unregarding; the elements of nature experienced and represented so vividly by the poet are almost without exception inanimate, and do not care. Very seldom do we have descriptions of animals or living things, and when we do they are of disembodied or anonymous objects: wings of birds, fir trees in the distance, waving crops. It is as if, with the same intensity with which he looks for the intoxication of beauty and communion with nature, the poet-traveller seeks distance and isolation. It is in the nature of perpetual movement and compulsive travel to escape connections and links—to keep one's distance. When represented in broad daylight, the world of the *Orfici* is a whirlwind of movement. Everything, including the poet through whose eyes we see everything, moves, and nothing connects with anything. Stillness belongs only to the night, and night is the time of solitude and rest, the time of the blackness of death.

The humans that populate the *Orfici* are in great number prostitutes. The same distance that the poet seeks from nature, he seeks from human society. The whore is the symbol of non-rapport *par excellence*. Furthermore, she is often seen at a window, in a doorway, behind a curtain or walking under the arches, which emphasizes her distance. The relationship with a prostitute is typically undemanding: she gives without asking, and no continuity or commitment are required. In fact, the poet professes explicitly his unwillingness to commit himself to a romantic relationship, or his incapability of doing so. In "Dualismo (Lettera aperta a Manuelita Etchegarray)" he apologetically shouts: "**io non pensavo, non pensavo a voi; io mai non ho pensato a voi**" (57). The character of Manuelita might well be fictional, but what the poet is saying is clear: no woman, however much loved, can retain him, or his feelings. The poet betrays Manuelita because of his "infinita solitudine." Loneliness, that drives him away from everything and everybody, is his doom. Male friendship, on the other hand, does not really appear in the *Orfici*. Regolo, the friend the poet cannot go away with because in that moment "his madness is calm," is not a friend at all: he is another lonely, compulsive traveller, equally doomed to solitary wandering. Each sees his own image reflected in the other; their resemblance and communality

of destiny moves them. They hug tenderly. But their friendship cannot but be a friendship of good-byes. Lonely souls do not travel together.

In his first person narration Tobino's psychiatrist sometimes mentions his friends. He says that now and then they come to visit. However, we never encounter them. The only company of his we encounter and get to know are the mad people: Tono, who although scared by his inner phantoms goes all the way to the inn to get the doctor his wine; "la signora Alfonsa" and "la Lella," who, in their madness, are sane enough to function as his servants and housekeepers; the door-keeper, to whose solitary little cubicle the doctor goes sometimes to have a chat and kill time. Then, of course, there are the madwomen of the wards, many of whom are crazily in love with him, expose themselves to him, cling, drooling, to the bars of their cells in the desperate attempt to touch him; or the other madwomen, those who adore him in silence, with a never expressed devotion that still constitutes the only purpose of their lives. Like the whores of Campana, these women live at an ungappable distance. One cannot help feeling, in the sober lines of his narration, that the psychiatrist does not dislike their love, devotion and admiration. Somehow, it gives him warmth and, why not, pleasure. But no relationship is possible between the mad population of the hospital and its doctor. No interaction other than force-feeding, mechanical or chemical sedation, and a few interviews can occur between the psychiatrist and the patients. And rightly so, of course. When la signora Alfonsa, after years of tranquility and dedication to her job as the doctor's servant, has a relapse and goes crazy, the doctor is genuinely upset. Still, he locks her up; he pushes her back to the core of the world to which she truly belongs. He has to. With la Lella the matter seems to be different. She remains stable and can continue to work for her doctor; but a sad passage reveals, without any possibility of doubt, the distance that separates them. It is Christmas. For many years the doctor has spent the holiday by himself, in his room. In a rather unusual way he lets us in on his feelings:

> Oggi è Natale, ero solo, non sapevo dove andare e non mi riusciva scacciare, mentre si avvicinava mezzogiorno, una sconsolazione che sempre più mi pungeva come volesse farmi arrivare al pianto. (100)

But this time one of his colleagues invites him to his home. For la Lella it is a terrible blow: their reciprocal loneliness had also been their only company on Christmas Day. "Già tante feste avevamo passate tacitamente insieme," says the narrator; where "tacitamente" sadly erases the comfort and coziness of "insieme" (101). The doctor of Magliano is an irremediably lonely man.

Enclosed in the space of the mental hospital, the insane person seems to embody exclusion in a privileged way. Self-excluded in the tragic isolation of

his or her illness, the mad person is excluded from society through incarceration. And yet the matter is not that simple. The psychiatrist of Magliano is equally self-excluded and isolated as the poet of the *Orfici*. Both Tobino and Campana, the former voluntarily while the latter involuntarily, end up sharing the destiny of incarceration.

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Notes

[1]Thanks to Simon Evnine for his constant presence and to Professor Joseph A. Dane, without whose encouragement and support this paper would never have been written. I would like to dedicate this paper to the memory of Giovanni Scolaro.

[2]All biographical information on Campana is taken from Turchetta, 1990.

[3]The medical record defines Campana "dedito al caffè del quale è avidissimo e ne fa un abuso eccezionalissimo" (Turchetta 68).

[4]I have taken all biographical information on Tobino from Grillandi, 1975.

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Amelia Rosselli and Exile in the *Serie ospedaliera*

By now the historical, biographical notes of the life of poet Amelia Rosselli have been well rehearsed, and necessarily so. She was born in Paris in 1930, the direct result of her Italian father's exile as a Resistance leader. She was bereft of her father by an equally historical deed in the assassination of the Rosselli brothers, Carlo and Nello, Amelia's father and uncle respectively. The family then moved to England, the homeland of Marion Cave, Amelia's mother, and then to the United States.

Just as she was denied a father and a fatherland, Rosselli likewise lacked a "mother tongue." Her poetic arsenal has been munitioned by the language of her birthplace, then a place of war, and next by that of her Anglo-American environs, locus of her haven-exile. In the bucolic space of Middlebury College, Amelia studied the language of her father which had also been spoken at home. It was not until 1946, however, that Rosselli reached Italian soil, a female Aeneas whose "homecoming" signaled a kind of self-exile of by then purely psychological dimensions. These life events, I maintain, become mirrored and thus regenerated in Rosselli's originally published volumes of poetry, each of which reflects a separate phase of life: *Variazioni belliche* as the war of her childhood; *Serie ospedaliera* as the exile of her adolescence; and *Documento* as the process of patriation as Rosselli entered into Italian life.

Significantly, the mirror that Rosselli holds in the form of her poems is like that of a fun house, which twists and distorts the object before it. Some features are foreshortened, magically tucked under and made to disappear. Other features, actually innocuous and invisible in their ordinariness, assume dominant and dominating proportions and thus significance. The resultant image bears very little resemblance to its original, in spite of the object's solid, physical, whole—historical—presence before the mirror. Critic Lucia Re might agree for she asserts that

> an orphan, a refugee and an exile, intimately acquainted with the experience of illness, loss, pain and mourning, Amelia Rosselli is nevertheless not interested in retelling her story in verse. Yet her poems do tell a story of sorts: but it is a story of their own making. (140)

While the exploration of all three Rosselli volumes is beyond the scope of this paper, I would like to begin in the middle, so to speak: with the phase I read as exile and its corresponding volume of poetry, *Serie ospedaliera*. The bellicose tactics of strict meter and the most active language skirmishes of *Variazioni belliche*[1] are in a state of withdrawal, which is not to say surrender, with *Serie ospedaliera*. The fun house mirror-reflection that these poems are, present portraits of exile as manifested in different forms of exclusion: the obvious exclusion from country—physical exile; exclusion from power and reality—psychological exile; and exclusion from love—emotional exile. Succinctly summed up: solitude, suffering and death, the death of desire (Re 147).

It is tempting to make something of the fact that the first poems of *Serie ospedaliera* date back to when Rosselli was thirty-three years old, the cliched "mezzo cammin di nostra vita." The possessive "nostra" finds an echo in Rosselli's own commentary to *La libellula*: "infatti il poema ha come tema centrale la libertà, e il nostro, e mio, 'libellarla'" (31).[2] Rosselli's use of the Italianized English "to libel it," where the pronoun refers to freedom, is consistent with her technique. With her poems she imposes sanctions of sorts on her sanctuary; in effect, she libels, that is, defames in writing, the presumed liberty of her haven-exile in the United States.

In the end, of course, the Dante analogy does not hold up, or even go very far, for many reasons, most particularly because the poet here is hardly destined for Paradise. Rather, every poem of the volume struggles to breathe through the battle-weary air of confusion, defeat, sadness and skepticism. *Serie ospedaliera* does not represent a moment of "tregua" after *Variazioni belliche*. In an interview with Giacinto Spagnoletti, Rosselli comments that "La 'serie' di poesia è 'ospedaliera' in quanto anche rassegnata a un ritornare criticamente sui propri passi, in quanto non più bellicosa nei confronti di sentimenti e intuizioni anche più rari o rarefatti" (*Antologia* 158). We can further say that the volume's very title indicates a kind of exile from battle but significantly on account of injury. The "hospital-space" is a place of pain, "suffering and death," where wounds are probed for shrapnel and are then cauterized, where the prognosis is bleak: "Il cielo caprino . . . / quasi vigorosamente prometteva: ignoranza / e terracotta" (3: 1-3).

Significantly, Rosselli does not inhabit this hospital space alone; her lyrics are peopled with a "you" ("tu") whose presence ostensibly establishes the substance of the "I" and simultaneously, as we shall see, often threatens the continued existence of the "I." This traditional poetic trope acquires a unique quality in Rosselli for "hers is an experimental (de)construction of the lyric voice

under the pressures of a language that is always dangerously divided against itself, and close to destruction and madness." (Re 140) Thus, we can say that the "I" of *Serie ospedaliera* stands in exile with an abyss on either side of her: destruction as caused by war, madness induced through patriation.

The remainder of this paper is a close textual reading of poems 2 and 3. I begin the process of analysis with a fundamental preoccupation of the exile: the questioning of her lot, her fate. Poems 2 and 3 each concern themselves with "sorte" and seem to offer the best hope of interpretation as a pair. The two poems are linked by common signifiers which just barely manage to snag their signifieds only in a cross-reading of the two. In preparation for the textual analysis, we would do well to keep in mind that

> [the] *Serie ospedaliera* relies on a vertical play of sound and semantic associations across the space of the text which undermines the possibility of reading sequentially from left to right and from top to bottom. . . . The deforming logic of dreams, with its cardinal principles of displacement and condensation, seems to be the rhetorical model adopted by Rosselli in poems whose predominantly surrealistic imagery forecloses any naturalization. . . . (Re 148)

Upon reading this "description" of Rosselli's technique, I turn to that quintessential text on dreams, Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams.* What Freud wrote in discussing condensation coincides perfectly with "fun-house mirror" effect of Roselli's poetry which I previously mentioned. Here is Freud:

> It could be seen that the elements which stand out as the principal components of the manifest content of the dream are far from playing the same part in the dream-thoughts. And, as a corollary, the converse of this assertion can be affirmed: what is clearly the essence of the dream-thoughts need not be represented in the dream at all. . . . So that only a single element of the dream-thoughts seems to have found its way into the dream-content, though that element was expanded to a disproportionate extent. (305)

In other words, Rosselli never speaks of exile in these two poems, but the notion of exile resides in the deformed logic of her images of "sorte."

Faced with such a challenge, I adopt a reasonable approach in isolating the common elements within the "grid" of the two poems:

2: 1 Sollevamento di peso e **particolarità della sorte**. . . ;
2: 10-11 . . . delusa di
una così miserabile sorte. . . ;

3: 1-2 **Il cielo caprino** che curvava le suole
quasi vigorosamente prometteva. . . ;
3: 6-8 . . . presto rivedrai rivivere le lustre
piantagioni e la raccolta, **un provvisorio**
accecamento della sorte. . . ;
3: 12-13 Presto
rivedrai **il cantare della sorte**. . . . (emphasis mine)

Every occurrence of "sorte" is preceded by a pertinent, contingent tag. The one exception is Rosselli's piquant synonym "Il cielo caprino" which finds itself in a central position: the third of five occurrences and the first line of poem 3. This verse's central significance is fortified by the fact that it represents one of only two instances of logical, nearly spoken syntax: "Il cielo caprino che curvava le suole / quasi vigorosamente prometteva: ignoranza / e terracotta." The poem might as well read, "The mischievous newspaper boy who kicked a stone along his route almost solemnly shouted: the latest gossip and money-saving coupons." The simple syntax and coherent message furthermore provide a straight passageway to cross over one poem from the other.

I now return to verse one of poem 2 to see what it is about "fate" that the poem is calling attention to with "particolarità della sorte:" what is particular about this life and what details compose this fate? Poem 2 immediately unleashes a flood of disparate details that pile up against one each other and fight for meaning and sense: "doves peek" just as "my strengths are snatched up by your flying away like a / candy, liquified the vocation to a semantic revision of the quarrels / and our birds."

The reader's own struggle to find sense, to dream-interpret, leads to the identification of the elements that are submitted to a condensation, a conflation of figures: colombelle X uccelli; le mie forze X la vocazione; sono prese X liquefatta. The specificity of doves, with their connotation of peacefulness gives way to the more general "birds." Coupled with "beghe," quarrels, the transformation from doves to birds suggests a transformation from placid contentment to bickering and anxiety. It is likewise possible to condense "le mie forze" with "la vocazione;" hence, the poet's real strengths lie in her vocation. This is, presumably, her fate, destiny, as is implicit in the meaning of vocation. Yet these strengths are beyond the control of the "I" for they are snatched up, liquified. What remains then, after this condensation? The verses "Tuo volare via come una / caramella" and "una semantica revisione delle beghe." These terms of poem 2 seek out their meaning in corresponding tropes in poem 3.

Firstly, "tuo volare via come una / caramella" finds an echo in poem 3, verses 10-11: "notte / di nuovo le caramelle una lavagna io." "Your flying away" leaves

a darkness, it is night once again. The "lavagna" is a blackening and an erasure of the "I." The blackboard exists in a meaningful way only by virtue of being inscribed, written upon, and through the writing it is given a temporary significance, only to be wiped out, and left bare and meaningless. As the "I" of the poem is effaced, the poet too in her vocation experiences a blackening, and erasure. The persistent sense then is a process of abandonment, cancellation, of the "I" by the "you." But this is an abandonment that is like candy, sweet and craved, not nourishing and possibly harmful. Furthermore, the abandonment is enacted in hostility, for poem 3 further clarifies: "ti scorro nelle tue dita misogene." The potential sensuality of "liquefatta" in poem 2 and "scorro" in poem 3 fall victim to the violence of the verse which has its psychological precedent in poem 1: ". . . una crudeltà continua, un tuo dormire nascosto / dalle mie preghiere."

A real sense of the isolation of the "I" is revealed in the concluding verses of the first stanza of poem 2. The bleak, hollow echo of "Nessuno" names the absent subject of the other syntactically logical verse: "Nessuno dei soldati che veramente / intendeva risposarsi seppe dirmi / chi è che veramente marcia." This apparently meaningful "sentence" implies a curious, unanswerable question: why would soldiers remarry, and most especially within the *Serie ospedaliera*? Why would they be widowers rather than deceased, abandoning husbands of widows? Whatever the possible response, the direct question nevertheless remains, "chi è che veramente marcia?" Here, once again, Rosselli evokes an image of movement, and it again seems to be movement away, a distancing, in effect, an abandonment. Indeed, the abandonment of the "I" is stated baldly after the ellipsis of the first verse of the second stanza:

> . . . solitaria alle regioni didascaliche
> sorreggevo brigantella delusa di
> una così miserabile sorte, oh . . . .

The sad fate of the "I" lies in her solitude and loneliness: as Rosselli comments to Spagnoletti, "una vita sistematicamente privata, interiorizzata, privi di contatti" (*Antologia* 157).

"Didactic regions" and the second occurrence of "sorte" winds back to the remaining verse: "una semantica revisione delle beghe." This line seems to state the underlying logic of the poems themselves. As we have begun to see, poem 3 works to effect a semantic revision of poem 2. This revision, then, is itself the quarrel, the trouble of the poet, whose power and authority to act within the didactic regions of her mind and within poetry are usurped by delusion, the result of abandonment, of exclusion, of exile.

The delusion is reiterated and thus reinforced within the framework of the second stanza of poem 3:

> Credere momentaneamente, rivedersi, pubblicare
> pentatonica delusione, il ridere è sempre
> amaro; presto rivedrai rivivere le lustre
> piantagioni e la raccolta, un provvisorio
> accecamento della sorte.

Willing herself to believe as long as is possible, the poet chooses the weightiest word to convey the duration of her belief by stretching out the syllables—mo-men-ta-ne-a-men-te. But then she stops short in the act of self-viewing, self-recognition. All that is possible, after all, is the publication of a five-scaled delusion, once again reinforced this time by the pairing of laughing and bitterness—"Il ridere è sempre amaro." And then, tantalizingly, the poet offers the hope of new light, new life, rebirth, new growth, new stability, which last only as long as her momentary belief. "Ignorance and terracotta," after all, for, revised, "presto rivedrai rivivere" transforms into "presto/rivedrai il cantare della sorte." We have already learned that it is "una così miserabile sorte," which permits only a temporary diminution of its powers.

The concluding lines of each poem bring about a rejoining of the "I" and the "you." After the abandonment, the poet's task is to revise and fine-tune her resurrected "tu," reincarnated from images of flying to the land-bound rabbit, "coniglio tu / ed io insieme" (3: 13-14). With the "tu" recoupled, "ricoppiato," with the "I," the poet effects a semantic revision of "scoppio e tu non correre:" "coniglio tu / ed io insieme nelle sere della morte:" The machine guns beaten into piano keys as well bring about the obliteration of feelings, of the sensations of life. While the obvious image may be a negative one, we must recall our "hospital space." The cessation of feelings may be the deadening of pain, the internal quiet after the tumult of battle. The "metrò" figures the burrows of the rabbits, site of haven, exile from the external, and literal, outside world.

The camphor denotes the sickroom of the evenings of death. But death of what? Death of desire: "'amour je t'ai tué.'" Desire itself is confined, exiled just as the poem's "I," for it exists only within the confines of an "industriale amare," and inflames the "I" and "you" within a safe. In this strong-box curved red lips are transformed into brick which protects from contamination and simultaneously prohibits the balance of a healthy environment.

The rippled mirror-glass of these two poems reflect the psychological response to being physically in a foreign place out of need for safety, but a place that effectively cuts emotional ties to everything familiar. It is the experience of

the sweet freedom that exists at the cost of an erasure of all that formerly composed the personal identity. In just this one, introductory analysis of two of the poems of *Serie ospedaliera*, then, it is possible to discern an artistic reworking of an historical event: Amelia Rosselli's response to and attempted resolution of her haven-exile figured by the countries of England and the United States.

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Poem 2

Sollevamento di peso e particolarità della sorte
sbirciavano colombelle le mie forze sono
prese dal tuo volare via come una
caramella, liquefatta la vocazione ad
una semantica revisione delle beghe
ed uccelli nostri. Nessuno dei soldati che veramente
intendeva risposarsi seppe dirmi
chi è che veramente marcia.

. . . solitaria alle regioni didascaliche
sorreggevo brigantella delusa di
una così miserabile sorte, oh
vedi io scoppio e tu non correre, la
mitra del pianoforte rimuove
sensazioni, metro, canfora, rosse
e curve labbra mattoni della cassaforte.

The lifting of weight and particulars of fate
doves were peeking my strengths are
snatched up by your flying away like a
candy, liquified the vocation to
a semantic revision of the quarrels
and our birds. None of the soldiers who truly
intended to remarry could tell me
who it is that is truly marching

. . . solitary in the didactic regions
I used to rule little brigand deluded
by a fate so miserable, oh
you see I burst and you don't run, the
machine gun of the piano removes
sensations, subway, camphor, red
and curved lips bricks of the safe.[15]

Poem 3

Il cielo caprino che curvava le suole
quasi vigorosamente prometteva: ignoranza
e terracotta.

Credere momentaneamente, rivedersi, pubblicare
pentatonica delusione il ridere è sempre
amaro; presto rivedrai rivivere le lustre
piantagioni e la raccolta, un provvisorio
accecamento della sorte.

Premi il tuo disingaggio nella notte
rivedi i programmi, *amour je t'ai tué*: notte
di nuovo le caramelle una lavagna io
ti scorro nelle tue dita misogene. Presto
rivedrai il cantare della sorte, coniglio tu
ed io insieme nelle sere della morte
confinata ad un industriale amare.

The goatish heaven which kicked up its heels
almost vigorously promised: ignorance
and terracotta.

To believe momentarily, re-see yourself, publish
pentatonic delusion laughter is always
bitter; soon you will again see living again the lustrous
plantations and the harvest, a provisional
blinding of fate.

Press your disengagement in the night
review the programs, *amour je t'ai tué*: night
again the candies a blackboard I
flow in your misogynist fingers. Soon
you will see again the singing of fate, rabbit you
and I together in the evenings of death
confined to an industrial loving.

Notes

[1]See Nelson Moe, "At the Margins of Dominion: The Poetry of Amelia Rosselli," particularly pp. 177-86 for a stimulating discussion of the strategies of this volume.

[2]All references to *La libellula* and poems from *Serie ospedaliera* are taken from the volume published by Studio Editoriale as part of their *Piccola enciclopedia* series, number 8. The poems will be referred to by number according to the order in which they appear in this volume and not in the origially published *Serie ospedaliera* (Mondadori, 1969).

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Amelia Rosselli's *Sleep* (*Sonno*): Beyond the Double-Margin

When the title for the present conference, "Exile and the Exile of Self," was presented to me, my first impulse was to entitle my own talk "Eggsalad and the Eggsalad of Self." Interestingly enough, when I spell-checked this document with my computer, the dictionary wanted me to replace the word "eggsalad" with the word "exile." Since "eggsalad" had no meaning for my computer, perhaps my title **would** have meaning for the Lacanian "exile" who crossing the desert came across a tablet with such an epithet as my would-be title. Lacan writes:

> Suppose that in the desert you find a stone covered with hieroglyphics. You do not doubt for a moment that, behind them, there was a subject who wrote them. But it is an error to believe that each signifier is addressed to you—this is proved by the fact you cannot understand any of it. On the other hand you define them as signifiers, by the fact that you are sure that each of these signifiers is related to each of the others.[1]

Unlike Tarzan who uncovers the ABC-primer his deceased parents had intended him to read, and deduces that the letters are insects crawling on the page, Lacan's desert-traveler is capable of identifying a process of signification.[2]

This recognition of the "precedence of the signifier" may perhaps be represented metaphorically by the elusive etymon of the word "exile." Philologists speculate that it derives from the Latin *ex solum*, "chased away from one's own soil." This possible etymology, however, reveals the modern poet's task of articulation: the lyric voice seeks to breach and transgress codes of linguistic competence. Poets wish to venture outside of tradition and glorify the "precedence of the signifier," or the signifier before a state of articulation. They attempt to grasp an enunciation before it reaches the stage of "secondary articulation."

As my colleague, Carmen Di Cinque, has already illustrated, Amelia Rosselli is herself an exile of sorts. My talk today, however, deals with a more recent publication in which Rosselli not only breaches lyric tradition, but also breaches the geographic literary tradition of her home soil by writing in English.

As Freud teaches, our lives are permeated with the desire to return to an

organic state, to return to the soil. "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust." The final release is, of course, death: Hamlet's "Undiscovered Country," where the economy of Western tradition has finally been eradicated, where all codes and systems of meaning have been deconstructed. Yet death is not to be embraced without some reservation, Hamlet warns:

> To die, to sleep—
> To sleep, perchance to dream. Ay, there's the rub,
> For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,
> When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
> Must give us pause. (*Hamlet* III.i.64-68)

Amelia Rosselli's *Sleep* (*Sonno*) is a journey into her "Undiscovered Country" in which the Italian poet revisits her linguistic formation and her "mistrust of language(s)," as Emmanuela Tandello has called it (364).

The work is a series of poems in English composed by Rosselli between 1953 and 1966: as a collection of poems it represents the (im)possibilities of interpretation and exegesis that occur when poetic language breaches the nonplused confines of the Western lyric tradition. Rosselli's *langue* or "linguistic competence" does so in an especially perplexing manner because it is based on a polyglot conception of language that opaquely moves in and out of English through paronomasia and calks of Italian words and graphemic representation of Italian language with English characters. It is perplexing and problematic, however, not in a pejorative sense; it is an experimentation that subverts normative codes of linguistic and lyric tradition.

The nature or genesis of this subversion lies perhaps in the origin of Rosselli's (ab)normative linguistic formation. She was born in Italy to an Italophone father and an Anglophone mother. At a young age her family moved to Paris where French was spoken at home.[3] A breach was already present in the poet's linguistic formation: Italian was the language of the father, and the presence of the mother-tongue, English, was usurped by French. From France, after the assassination of her father, she moved with her mother and siblings to England, and then to the United States. During this period, 1940-1946, we can only assume that she spoke English in the home, and in America the poet herself affirms that she had institutionalized schooling: "Feci gli studi ginnasiali e liceali sino a quindici anni, seguendo per ultimo dei corsi estivi in vista del mio ritorno in Italia, che avvenne nel 1946" (*Antologia* 151). It was upon her return to Italy, however, that the first shock to her linguistic identity would come about:

> A sedici anni, dunque, raggiunsi Firenze, e qui ci furono delle complicazioni. Gli studi che avevo fatto [negli Stati Uniti] non erano equiparabili, fu una

> grossa delusione per me. Volevano che studiassi con i tredicenni, io rifiutai. (*Antologia* 151)

Indeed, it must have been tremendous for a sixteen-year-old to find that the scholastic institution of her native Italy would not recognize the experience of her early adolescent socialization. As a result she returned to London to continue her studies: "A Firenze vissi qualche mese, mi trasferii a Londra per riprendere gli studi, che non erano risultati validi in Italia" (*Antologia* 151). Her words, "ci furono molte complicazioni," seem to indicate that what once had been pure and simple, had in turn become complicated and diverse. Moreover, when she says, "io rifiutai. . . . [M]i trasferii a Londra per riprendere gli studi, che non erano risultati validi in Italia," she marks the first break from a tradition that had refused to recognize her intellectual—or the beginnings of her intellectual—formation: she arrived in Florence—which is historically the linguistic center of the Italian lyric tradition—and was denied access to her (paternal) literary tradition when they insisted that she study with students younger than she. Her reaction was to return to London, center of the English literary tradition, to continue her studies. This identity crisis would later be even more deeply engraved in the poet when she returned to Italy at the age of eighteen to work, as Emmanuela Tandello writes:

> Amelia, like her two older brothers, was educated in America and then in England. Her first contact with Italy came at the age of eighteen,[4] where, as an officially "unskilled" young woman, she found employment working as a translator, perpetuating thus the by now permanent dimension of linguistic and cultural split(s) experienced from birth. (364)

Where then in the hierarchies and genres of literature—so dear to literary scholars and critics—must we place an Italian poet who writes and publishes in Italy a work composed in English?

In Italy Rosselli has been anthologized by the academic institution (albeit dubiously) as the representative *par excellence* of Italian women poets: Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo distinguished her in his *Poeti italiani del Novecento* as the voice of women poets in Italy (although she is the only woman writer allowed by him). Mengaldo writes in the preface to his anthology:

> Osando una formula, [perhaps aware of the ambivalence of what he is about to say] si potrebbe parlare di identificazione tendenzialmente assoluta della lingua poetica col **registro del privato**, del vissuto-quotidiano personale: equazione realizzata per la prima volta coi risultati finora poeticamente più efficaci, io credo, dalla Rosselli, un'iniziale atipica che anche per questo oggi si rivela un'anticipatrice. (lxi)

Bordering on irony, he praises Rosselli while at the same time equating her poetry to an equation or formula "**del privato**."

And even though he anthologizes her, he insists on emarginating her work (and thus by extension he emarginates all Italian women poets for which he has chosen Rosselli as sole representative) by calling her an "experiential" rather than "experimental" writer:

> . . . [L]'aggressione disgregatrice perpetrata da [i suoi versi] pochissimo o nulla ha in comune con lo sperimentalismo guidato e tecnologico della neo-avanguardia. . . , ed esattamente opposto ne è l'esito: una scrittura, o piuttosto una scrittura-parlata, intensamente informale, in cui per la prima volta si realizza quella spinta alla riduzione assoluta della lingua della poesia a **lingua del privato**. . . . (Mengaldo 994-95)

Lucia Re contested Mengaldo's argument in her article, "Poetry and Madness"[5], and it is not my purpose to discuss Rosselli's Italian poetry here, as my colleague has already done so. It is interesting to note, however, that Mengaldo mentions the work, *Sleep*, and the English writings of the poet in his introduction to the selection of her work (993), and he maintains that "La suggestiva e spesso potente poesia della Rosselli era e resta un fenomeno in sostanza unico nel panorama letterario italiano, legandosi piuttosto ad altre tradizioni, l'anglosassone . . . e la surrealista francese" (993-94). It is indeed contradictory that he call her work "unico nel panorama italiano" while he singles her out at the same time as the voice of an **entire** generation of women poets. It's almost like the overly ambitious first-year college student who highlights the first line of every paragraph in the text book: by underlining the topic sentence, the student consequently **erases** the information itself.

The inherent flaw of his paradoxical categorization of Rosselli reveals that: (1) by denying her a place among the *neo-avanguardia* poets, he—like many other historians and critics of the avant-garde have done with women writers—emarginates women from the all-male, avant-garde club since he calls Rosselli the **best** of the women writers; and (2) he doubly emarginates her work when he says that her work belongs to other traditions which lie outside of Italian literary heritage, i.e. the Anglo-Saxon and French Surrealist traditions. Mengaldo seems to subscribe to the notion that there is a tradition of the avant-garde in Italy that must be recognized in order to join that club, and nevertheless the presence of a male signature is necessary to open the doors to that club.

The polyglot aspect and international influences present in her work are the very elements of her writing that empower and enrich her poetry (even though critics like Mengaldo write them off as experiential and marginal). Her work is

inherently outside of tradition (be it venerable, worthy or not). Moving beyond the "double margin"—as Susan Suleiman has called it (11-32)—of literary criticism and definitions of literature and the avant-garde, Rosselli experiments with the boundaries of language and lyricism. Moreover, the choice of English, her mother-tongue, represents a subversion of the Italian tradition to which Rosselli cannot help but belong. This perhaps is the strongest and most striking force of her writing: it denies categorization while creating an allegory of *plurilinguismo*, so coveted in the Italian tradition. As Susan Suleiman writes (of French Surrealist women writers) in her book, *Subversive Intent*, these should be considered positive aspects that found the basis of experimentation in such a work:

> In a system in which the marginal, the avant-garde, the subversive, all that disturbs and "undoes the whole" is endowed with positive value, a woman artist who can identify those concepts with her own practice and metaphorically with her own femininity can find them a source of strength and self-legitimation. (17)

Rosselli's "practice" of writing in English marks an exaltation of her femininity, her mother-tongue, which is the basis of her work.

It is as if Rosselli foresaw the way she would be emarginated by the Italian academic institution when she wrote the poem which she placed at the beginning of her English *canzoniere*, *What woke those tender heavy fat hands*:

> What woke those tender heavy fat hands
> said the executioner as the hatchet fell
> down upon their bodily stripped souls
> fermenting in the dust. You are a stranger here
> and have no place among us. We would have you off our list
> of potent able men
> were it not that you've never belonged to it. Smell
> the cool sweet fragrance of the incense burnt, in honour
> of some secret soul gone off to enjoy an hour's agony
> with our saintly Maker. Pray be away
> sang the hatchet as it cut slittingly
> purpled with blood. The earth is made nearly
> round, and fuel is burnt every day of our lives.

While the first period appears fragmented due to the absence of punctuation in the indirect discourse (this [non]use of punctuation makes me think of Gertrude Stein), the second period speaks loud and clear to the poet telling her that not only will she not be included on the "list," but she never "belonged to

it." The "hatchet" sings as it evokes Christianity ("the incense burnt" and "our saintly Maker") and castrates the object, slicing it away from the saintly tradition of which Mengaldo speaks. In *What woke those tender heavy fat hands*, Rosselli parodies Western traditions of religion, and patriarchal hierarchy (and possibly psychoanalysis, i.e. the notion of castration), and along side the fragments of these codes which appear in the text, the allegory of the executioner, with his singing hatchet, looms above her.

The executioner and the hatchet are eager to emarginate Rosselli because her linguistic flexibility denies categorization and challenges conventions and normative codes of language. But Rosselli's use of language *per se* represents most importantly a recovery in her work of a pre-social organization, or pre-dipal state, a breach of normative processes of articulated linguistic signification. As Emmanuela Tandello (who is the translator of *Sleep*) observes pointing to Rosselli's Italian poetry in her article, "Doing the Splits: Language(s) in Amelia Rosselli's Poetry":

> the proverbial mistrust for language revealed by her Italian poetry is in fact a mistrust for language *tout court*, deriving from her personal experience of language(s) as (a) system(s) of communication, and the glaring absence of a clearly identifiable "mother" tongue; and, finally, that this foreignness is the ideal inhabitable space of an exiled identity. (364)

"Mistrust of language" is indeed a mistrust of normative codes of communication, and the act of writing in English reflects, moreover, a mistrust of the "father" tongue: in *Sleep* Rosselli returns to the mother-tongue that was denied her until the death of her father and her family's self-imposed exile from Continental Europe.[6]

In *Sleep*, however, she recuperates the language of her father in graphemic representations of Italian words. The representation of Italian in *Sleep* introduces signifiers into the text that appear at first glance to be nonsensical, yet in reality are the forces that undermine what Julia Kristeva has called the "symbolic"—or the articulated state of signification—and, hence, recuperate the "semiotic"—or the pre-articulation (94).

An example of the "precedence of the signifier" or the recuperation of the semiotic may be found in the line:

> and run out rapid against a fence of spine. (*Sleep* 40)

The signifier, "spine," on a paradigmatic axis (as opposed to a syntagmatic axis), in an English code of signification, recalls "spine" as in "spinal cord." But on the following page where the Italian translation in presented (the English is on

the even pages and the Italian on the odd pages; thus the original and translated texts are revealed simultaneously), the reader finds the same graphemic representation, "spine," which in Italian means "thorns":

> e correre fuori rapida contro una cinta di spine.

Depending on the linguistic competence of the reader, the exegesis of the text offers multiple possibilities. This is indeed the power of the text, and it is along this axis that it passes in and out of symbolic signification to and from the semiotic. Along this axis the scope and dimension of the work is truly revealed: as the reader brings more and more linguistic competence to the reproduction of the text, more and more meanings are generated. The anomaly itself, the breach of the linguistic code, opens up seemingly limitless readings of the text.

An incredibly problematic case of this sort of linguistic anomaly in symbolic signification may be found in the line:

> o the shallops put out to sea and we remain ashore. (*Sleep* 34)

In the translator's note of the book, Tandello (who translated the work under Rosselli's guidance (Caporali 8)) writes, "l'italiano funziona . . . visibilmente, emergendo attraverso il controllato poliglottismo giocoso dei cosidetti lapsus—"shallop" per scialuppa, "shind," scindere, "fall drit into the mire," cadere dritta nel fango" (*Sleep* 216). Whereas "shind" and "drit" are not to be found in the English dictionary, the word "shallop," although rare, corresponds in meaning to the Italian "scialuppa": "dinghy."[7] Perhaps this is merely Tandello's oversight, but, editors and translators aside, the power of the text—as is—lies in the fact that it calls upon the reader's linguistic competence to recognize its internal process of signification. The "mistrust of language" is transferred thus from the subject to the reader, and hence the reader may consciously become subject. The obvious parameters of this phenomenon begin with the reader's competence in Italian and English, but they become infinitely complicated if you consider the possibility of a Italian/English translator-reader, or a Shakespearean scholar-reader, or a bilingual native speaker-reader. The reader is Lacan's desert-traveler: a wayfarer in the wilderness of signification, the reader believes erroneously that the text speaks to her/him when in fact the purely graphemic representation speaks only to itself.

Ever since Pier Paolo Pasolini published his "Notizia su Amelia Rosselli" in *Il Menabò*, scholars and critics have inappropriately called this experimentation in linguistic competence "misspellings" or "lapsus."[8] These anomalies of Rosselli's poetry are not mistakes or errors, and her work does not belong under the rubric "atypical" or "curious." Rosselli's use of language is a formal and

technical experimentation with language. The title of the collection of poems, *Sleep*, is ironic in this sense: for years her poetry has been called "informal," "playful" and full of lapsus into the unconscious; if sleep is truly where the unconscious reigns, the title parodies those critics and scholars who have wanted to categorize Rosselli's work as full of slips into the unconscious. *Sleep* does not slip into the unconscious: it is a stylistic representation of the precedence of the signifier in the human experience. The work doesn't assume that it's reader is Italophone, Anglophone or Eskimoan for that matter. The text only asks the reader to recognize that the words are signifiers, and that since they have been organized by a subjective voice, they speak to someone, perhaps not the "you" of the reader, but someone.

Rosselli was born into the high bourgeois tradition of Italy: she passed through the French, the English and the American traditions, and then finally returned to Italy as an adult. In her book, *Sleep*, she partially reveals the mistrust that she developed for language in her adolescent years, indeed the period in which linguistic formation is galvanized. The executioner and the hatchet in her work represent the attraction to death present in all works of art. "'[A]rt takes on murder and moves through it," writes Kristeva. "It assumes murder in so far as artistic practice considers death the inner boundary of the signifying process. Crossing that boundary is precisely what constitutes 'art'" (119-20). Finally, Amelia Rosselli can sleep.

> To die, to sleep—
> To sleep, perchance to dream. Ay, there's the rub.

Amelia Rosselli has the courage to breach and overcome Hamlet's "rub."

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Notes

[1]Lacan 199 (Easthope 31)

[2]"The boats, and trains, and cows and horses were quite meaningless to [Tarzan], but not quite so baffling as the odd little figures which appeared beneath and between the colored pictures—some strange kind of bug he thought they might be, for many of them had legs though nowhere could he find one with eyes and a mouth. It was his first introduction to the letters of the alphabet, and he was over ten years old" (Burroughs 43). Tarzan does return, however, to his parents cabin and makes a discovery similar to that of the Lacanian wayfarer: "In his hands was a primer opened at a picture of a little ape similar to himself, but covered, except for hands and face, with strange, colored fur, for

such he though the jacket and trousers to be. Beneath the picture were three little bugs

BOY.

And now he had discovered in the text upon the page that these three were repeated many times in the same sequence.

Another fact he learned—that there were comparatively few individual bugs; but these were repeated many times, occasionally alone, but more often in company with others" (Burroughs 48).

[3]Already a tension had developed in the linguistic hegemony of the household: "Si parlava francese anche in casa, tranne che con mio padre, fedele all'italiano. Quando arrivava lo zio Nello, si parlava sempre in italiano; l'inglese l'ho dovuto imparare dopo." *Intervista ad Amelia Rosselli* (in *Antologia poetica* 150)

[4]Actually her first contact was at the age of sixteen, as Rosselli herself explains in the quote above.

[5]Re writes of Mengaldo's introduction: "What is most striking, however, is the extent to which the anthologist's treatment of Rosselli constitutes a form of misrepresentation in terms of the very categories he establishes. For, as even cursory perusal of Mengaldo's own choice of poems reveals, Rosselli's work is formally experimental and resists any immediate naturalization. Her link with the Italian *neoavanguardia*, while neither slavish nor obvious, cannot be denied" (134).

[6]It is interesting to note—as Rosselli revealed in an interview about *Sleep*—that the work began as polyglot diary that was then abandoned when she wanted to "acquire security" in Italian, her father's tongue: "Nei primi tempi scrivevo a mano un diario in tre lingue, camminando e cercando di sentire se non proprio un campo magnetico qualcosa del genere. Quei testi non rappresentavano una soluzione ma un esercizio. Avrei voluto pubblicarli come qualcosa di momentaneo, di sperimentale. Maturava in quegli anni la volontà di esprimermi in italiano, di acquisire una sicurezza che ancora non avvertivo." As cited by Caporali 9.

[7]*Webster's New Twentieth-Century Dictionary of the English Language*. New York: Collins World, 1978. 1666.

[8]Even Tandello uses the word. See quote above.

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La colpa di essere nati: Exile Through the Eyes of Italian Jews

Song of Exile

Exile is the emptiness—for however much you brought
with you, there's far more you've left behind.
Exile is the ego that shrinks, for how can you prove
what you were and what you did?
Exile is the erasure of pride.
Exile is the escape that is often worse than the prison.

Exile is the xenophobe—for every single one who likes you,
you'll find ten in whom there is nothing but hate. . . .

Exile is the loneliness in the middle of a crowd—
Exile is longing never to be fulfilled,
it is love unrequited, the loss never replaced—
the listless, loveless, long wait for the train
that never arrives, the plane that never gets off the ground.

Exile is the end and never the beginning—
Exile is the eruption whose lava stream carries you away—
it is the eternity measured in minutes, the eyes
that never enjoy the familiar sight,
the ears that listen to alien music.

Exile is a song that only the singer can hear.
Exile is an illness that not even death can cure—for how
can you rest in soil that did not nourish you?
Exile is the warning example to those who still
have their homes, who belong.
But will you take heed of the warning? (Cited by Tabori 14)

The Italian writer Primo Levi urges us to answer that question. The danger in viewing another as an Other, of believing that "ogni straniero è nemico" lies

in its overwhelming destructive power, for when this "dogma inespresso diventa premessa maggiore di un sillogismo," Levi warns us, "allora, al termine della catena, sta il Lager" (*Se questo è un uomo* 9).

On the tenth of January, 1946, almost a year after Primo Levi's release from Auschwitz, he wrote a poem entitled "Shemà." His poem, addressed to those who "still have their homes, who belong" juxtaposes their image of comfort to the image of a prisoner, "reduced to bestial condition, only questionably a human being" (Harrowitz 32). His words ask us to consider whether a man is still a man, and a woman still a woman when subjected to the utmost atrocities. For at Auschwitz, as Elie Wiesel wrote, "not only man died, but also the idea of man" (in *Literary Exile* 705):

Voi che vivete sicuri
Nelle vostre tiepide case,
Voi che trovate tornando a sera
Il cibo caldo e visi amici:

Considerate se questo è un uomo,
Che lavora nel fango
Che non conosce pace
Che lotta per mezzo pane
Che muore per un sì o per un no.
Considerate se questa è una donna,
Senza capelli e senza nome
Senza più forza di ricordare
Vuoti gli occhi e freddo il grembo
Come una rana d'inverno. (Levi, "Shemà," *Ad ora incerta*)[1]

While the first part of the poem confronts the reader with a question, the second part of the poem commands him to never forget it:

Meditate che questo è stato:
Vi comando queste parole.
Scolpitele nel vostro cuore
Stando in casa andando per via,
Coricandovi alzandovi:
Ripetetele ai vostri figli.
O vi si sfaccia la casa,
La malattia vi impedisca,
I vostri nati torcano il viso da voi.

Levi's words are a paraphrase of the *Shemà*,[2] the most basic and essential prayer in Judaism. Recited daily, it is a call to monotheism, a command to love

the Lord, to teach and forever remember His word:

> Hear O Israel: The Lord Our God, The Lord is One. And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. And these words which I command thee this day shall be in thy heart; and thou shall teach them diligently unto thy children, and thou shall talk of them when thou sittest in thy house,
>
> and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. (*Deuteronomy* 6)

Levi's command, however, is of a much darker call—it is the command required after the events of the Holocaust. And it is the curse upon those who forget, for their very forgetfulness lies in the perpetuation of such inhumanity. "Forgetfulness lies at the root of exile, just as remembrance lies at the root of deliverance," Elie Wiesel cautions us (Wiesel and de Saint-Cheron 96). It is for this reason that Holocaust survivors such as Primo Levi and Wiesel have striven to retell their stories, to resume the survivor's sacred responsibility of bearing witness to the horrible truth. Levi sees it as "un dovere" yet also as "un rischio: il rischio di apparire anacronistici, di non essere ascoltati" ("I sommersi e i salvati," *Opere* 819). For though there comes a healing in sharing, there lies the pain of recalling that which cannot be understood by those who have not experienced it. "È un godimento intenso, fisico, inesprimibile, essere nella mia casa, fra persone amiche, e avere tante cose da raccontare," Levi recalls in *Se questo è un uomo,* "ma non posso non accorgermi che i miei ascoltatori non mi seguono . . . essi sono del tutto indifferenti: parlano confusamente d'altro fra di loro, come se io non ci fossi" (53). As another Holocaust survivor observed, the *univers concentrationnaire* is "a universe apart, totally cut off, the weird kingdom of an unlikely fatality" (Radcliff-Umstead 61). Exile proves inescapable, for even upon one's return, it haunts the individual.

Exile, with its accompanying physical, psychological and religious anguish, has been an intrinsic part of Jewish thought and history since the destruction of the First Temple. The image of the Wandering Jew forever in exile, without a homeland, is merely a mirror of an historical reality.[3] This exile has not only entailed physical and material displacement. For a people whose identity, at least initially, depended on their faith, an exile from Israel was devastating since their religion was intrinsically tied to the land. As expressed in the prayer, "The Anguish of Zion:"

> The headstone [Jerusalem] has been turned into ruins, into a plowing ground, and the inheritors of the Heritage [Torah] have become an object of scorn among the nations. My heart aches within me, pained and anguished, for we

> are left as without a father and have become as orphans. [Israel,] tender and delicate, who was surrounded by a hedge of roses, is now in distress [and] is handed over into the hand of her adversaries. [Jerusalem] the faithful city has become as a window, and the children [of Israel of whom it is said,] "Who can count them?" have been sold without money.
>
> (Cited in *From Exile to Redemption* 3)[4]

This spiritual anguish was felt intensely by a population who, strong in religious faith, suffered a feeling of being disconnected from the Divine. As the Jewish people resettled in other lands, a new attachment to the adopted homeland often challenged the spiritual connection previously felt for the holy land, Israel. With loyalties torn, a return to the spiritual homeland was not always easy. As the Jewish Italian poet Angiolo Orvieto expressed in his poem "Il vento di Sion:"

> The beckoning mirage of Zion
> is small comfort to a Florentine Jew
> even if I too dream happily of palm trees
> and of Temple's columns arisen again
> Too much lively Latin wind
> has stirred my Eastern blood
> lulled by age old indolence
> Palm trees, yes, but the cypresses of Florence?
> The Temple, yes, but what of this cathedral
> with its marble flowering in the sky?
> I am not like him, the one who calls for me
> like a human bell, for I would not be able
> to turn my back on my Tuscan people
> even though at times they cry "Down with the Jews"
>
> Here are my roots, too painful
> to sever . . . and then, for what dream?
> The Messiah will come, but perhaps not quite yet
> Leave me be with this air, these bronzes
> and Verrochio's marbles, the smiling images of Ghirland
> with the octaves of my beloved Poliziano! (Cited in *Garden and Ghettos* 153)

This poem, written in 1928, was witness to another crisis occurring within the Jewish community. With the progressive emancipation of Jews throughout Europe during the nineteenth century, the Jewish community faced a period of change and instability. Assimilation, accompanied by frequent conversions to Christianity, weakened Jewish identity and faith. The rise of positivism in science and philosophy further undermined traditional religious beliefs. Inevitably, Jewish communities became "less clearly defined and there ensued

a collective crisis of assimilation and identity" (Moloney 56). Ironically, marginalization from society had helped to maintain Jewish values and identity.

Assimilation within society and loss of religious faith did not, however, free the Jews of their cultural heritage. At the turn of the century Italian Jews, no longer confined to the walls of the ghetto, still felt the burden of their Jewishness. Italo Svevo, seemingly oblivious to his cultural and religious heritage, suffered the "small discomfitures of being a Jew without any of the consolations of Judaism" (Moloney 57). In 1880, he was refused employment because of his "Israelite" heritage. The writer's use of numerous pseudonyms attests to a desire to conceal his origins; origins which he solemnly acknowledges as being difficult for his two Jewish literary friends, Umberto Saba and Giacomo Debenedetti. Contemplating an essay on Kafka, he commented: "Yes, he was a Jew. Certainly, the Jew's position is not a comfortable one" (Gatt-Rutter 57).

Svevo recognized a dilemma which forever confronts the Jew: the weight of carrying a heritage which, even if not embraced, carries a responsibility, an awareness, a certain sensitivity. Natalia Ginzberg addresses this in her autobiographical work *Vita immaginaria*:

> Io sono ebrea. Tutto quello che riguarda gli ebrei, mi sembra sempre che mi coinvolga direttamente. Sono ebrea solo per parte di padre, ma ho pensato sempre che la mia parte ebraica doveva essere in me più pesante e ingombrante dell'altra parte. (177-78)

Both Svevo and Ginzberg rarely, if ever, make mention of their Jewish identity. Yet, they do not seem to overlook its personal significance. No longer connected to their religion, their Jewishness still entails a sense of exile, of alienation. Its focus, however, has shifted. While the religious Jew suffers a spiritual anguish in his exile from both God and Israel, the exile of the non-religious Jew carries a psychological dimension, an exile suffered from the sense of feeling Other. Though the focus of alienation has shifted, its sense is still there. Whether the Jew is religious or not, the feeling of exile exists; actively apparent during wartime and even during peace, a feeling that, as Elie Wiesel claims, is

> . . . still present, but different. Exile in peacetime makes us feel uncomfortable. It's a kind of reminder: Watch out, you will not be here long; you come from somewhere else, and someday you will be going somewhere else. (92)

Elie Wiesel's words would have seemed irrelevant, however, to the Italian Jews at the turn of the century. By the mid nineteen-hundreds, most Italian Jews were middle class, well-educated, highly secularized citizens. Accepted in society, traces of anti-semitism were, by and large, uncommon. It is for this

reason that during the later years of Fascism, racial discrimination and persecution came as a shock to the Jewish community. Italian Jews generally viewed themselves as "Italians first, Jewish second" (Segre 18). Most young Jews were drawn to secular and humanistic ideologies rather than Jewish religious and cultural traditions. Primo Levi himself comments that his Jewishness, before the war, was simply "un puro fatto culturale" (*Autoritratto* 19). Ironically, Levi's experiences during the Resistance and the Holocaust deepened his Jewish identity. Levi testifies to this himself, for in the midst of persecution he renews and recaptures a heritage, an identity that lay latent. Levi's awareness of his heritage and pride in it grew in relation to the racial persecution and developed as a result of his survival in Auschwitz: "Sono diventato ebreo in Auschwitz. La coscienza di sentirmi diverso mi è stata imposta . . . . Facendomi sentire ebreo, [Auschwitz] mi ha sollecitato a recuperare, dopo, un patrimonio culturale che prima non possedevo" ("Cronologia" xliii). Through his encounters with the Eastern European Jews, he discovers a culture that is strange, because of its different language, yet also oddly familiar. During the recital of the Kaddish, the Prayer for the Dead, Levi listens to their words and experiences a sense of shared destiny—that "dolore antico del popolo che non ha terra, il dolore senza speranza dell'esodo ogni secolo rinnovato" (*Se questo* 13) which draws him closer to his Jewish identity. In the tragic making of history every prisoner's story becomes the story of, as Levi writes, "una nuova Bibbia" (*Se questo* 59).

A recapturing of identity is, in the midst of exile, essential to the individual. For writers such as Levi and Bassani it is crucial to recover one's identity and heritage. Even for a writer like Umberto Saba, who never claimed a connection to his Jewishness and was unwilling to "recognize a cultural distinction between what was Jewish and what was not" (Hughes 67) for, as he wrote in his preface to *Gli ebrei* "differences are more a matter of style than substance," all being nothing more than "a splash of color" (Saba, *Stories* 11), a walk by the Jewish cemetery rekindles a memory of comfort. In his poem "Tre vie," he recalls with affection his Jewish ancestry:

> il vecchio cimitero
> degli ebrei, così caro al mio pensiero,
> se vi penso i miei vecchi, dopo tanto
> penare e mercatare, là sepolti,
> simili tutti d'animo e di volti. (Saba, *Per conoscere Saba* 201).

The cemetery serves as a place to remember one's ancestry, to recapture one's heritage, a link with the past which is as real as the present. In Bassani's book *Gli occhiali d'oro,* the Jewish narrator also expresses this affinity with his cherished past. Here though, the cemetery is not simply a place of affection,

sympathy and compassion, but a place of redemption, where the narrator, by recapturing the value of his past, renews his sense of self. In the midst of lethal persecution, the narrator must struggle to redefine himself, for his identity is no longer inescapable from the image created by society. By finding a link to his own past and place in the community, he is able to overcome an overwhelming sense of desolation. In his moment of "silenzio ostinato" of desperation, of an "atroce senso di esclusione," he recovers his past, becoming part of something which is greater than the destructive label placed on him by society. Overlooking the city and Jewish graveyard, the young man overcomes his identity crisis and sense of alienation:

> Quand'ecco . . . mi sentii d'un tratto penetrare da una gran dolcezza, da una pace e da una gratitudine tenerissime. Il sole al tramonto, forando una scura coltre di nuvole bassa sull'orizzonte, illuminava vivamente ogni cosa . . . . Mi era bastato recuperare l'antico volto materno della mia città, riaverlo ancora una volta tutto per me, perché quell'atroce senso di esclusione che mi aveva tomentato nei giorni scorsi cadesse all'istante. (Bassani, *Gli occhiali* 84)

In the midst of persecution, both Bassani and Levi recognize the healing power felt upon connecting to one's heritage and self. Both writers, however, recognize the difficulties faced by those who, having survived persecution, must return to society. For the absence of persecution does not guarantee an absence of pain. Primo Levi discovers that exclusion created by history haunts the individual even after the event. From the destruction suffered from an historical exile comes the anguish endured of an interior exile. Ridden with a sense of guilt, Primo Levi is tormented by the question of why he has survived and what right he has to the life he leads. He is a "guiltless victim" but as a survivor he carries a heavy weight. In the poem "Il superstite" Levi implores the ghostly companions who haunt him to leave:

> Indietro, via di qui, gente sommersa,
> Andate. Non ho soppianto nessuno,
> Non ho usurpato il pane di nessuno,
> Nessuno è morto in vece mia. Nessuno.
> Ritornate alla vostra nebbia.
> Non è mia colpa se vivo e respiro
> E mangio e bevo e dormo e vesto panni.

On the threshold of returning home, Primo Levi faces the challenge of retelling his story and the double anguish that accompanies it: the fear of being silenced, misunderstood and the anguish of a forever haunting memory. The German's cruel words, that "if anyone did by chance survive and try to tell the

story, no one would believe it" (Feldman 147) haunt Levi, for tragically, they have proven true by the groups and individuals who have insisted that the Holocaust never took place. And his attempt to return to normalcy, to escape the memory of the concentration camp, proves impossible. In his poem "Alzarsi" Levi dreams "of going home, of eating, of telling our story;" yet, as the poem reveals, even after reaching home he finds no peace. He writes:

> Ora abbiamo ritrovato la casa,
> Il nostro ventre è sazio,
> Abbiamo finito di raccontare.
> È tempo. Presto udremo ancora
> Il comando straniero:
> «Wstawac.»

"Wstawac," the Polish word for "Wake up!", is the "condanna di ogni giorno" (*Se questo* 56) which announced the beginning of each excruciating day in the concentration camp. Even now this word tortures Levi's consciousness, rendering him forever victim to the past.

The struggle to return to normalcy and its inherent difficulties is expressed by Giorgio Bassani's fictional character, Geo Josz, in his short story "Una lapide in via Mazzini." In this story, as in others, Bassani represents existence as a "state of exile where individuals remain forever excluded from the life of others." Exile also transcends "geographical and political banishment as it comes to represent the psychological condition of being apart from others" (Radcliff-Umstead 37-38). Geo Josz, the only Holocaust survivor of his town, Ferrara, returns to discover that his name is inscribed on the plaque being put up on the synagogue in remembrance of the 183 Ferrarese Jews who were deported to Germany in the autumn of 1943. The town has chosen to include him with the "dead past," a past that the community would prefer to forget, acknowledging it by the simpler means of a plaque that may collect dust in time. "Egli era tornato quando più nessuno l'aspettava. Che cosa voleva, adesso?" (Bassani, "Una lapide" 100) the people of Ferrara ask. Exiled into death, he returns from it; yet, seen as a haunting remnant of the past, he suffers ultimate exclusion by the rejection of the community.

Upon his return to Ferrara, he is barely recognized. Starvation edema has transformed his body into a mass of fat, fat which the townspeople see as proof of the favorable conditions of the concentration camp—"**L'edèma da fame** non esisteva, era una invenzione bella e buona" (Bassani, "Una lapide" 101). Even when the community does accept him, it is on their own very narrow, superficial terms. Apologies are given for not having recognized him immediately, for having tried to "respingerlo, di escluderlo" (Bassani, "Una lapide" 109) yet their

"inclusion" of him never addresses who he is as a person. Their insistence that they too have changed—"Ma vedi: anche noi siamo cambiati, il tempo è passato anche per noi . . ." (Bassani, "Una lapide" 109)—resounds as a hollow supplication to a man who has survived an indescribable horror. Their conviction that life must go on, that a bright future awaits all, sounds meaningless to Geo, for he cannot separate himself from his past experience.

Why is it that he must hold on to his memory, to a past that seemingly condemns him? The community asks:

> Possibile che dopo essere sceso all'inferno, e per miracolo esserne risalito, in lui non ci fosse altro impulso che di rievocare immobilmente il passato, così come provava in qualche modo l'agghiacciante schiera di fotografie dei suoi morti? (Bassani, "Una lapide" 111)

Yet, how can we determine a past static when the past itself is in constant dialogue with the present? As Eugenio Montale conveys in his poem "Dora Markus," one's past, as opposed to facts on a blackboard, cannot be erased. Dora, herself Jewish and threatened by Nazi persecution, carries "una storia di errori / imperturbati e la incide / dove la spugna non giunge" (Montale 159). Dora, as Bassani's protagonist Geo, is part of a past which concurrently defines the present. However victim to his past, he is also defined by it. If he were to sever himself from it, he would lose a part of his very self.

Geo is never successful in conveying the horrors of deportation because the community, in its belief that history will fade into oblivion, refuses to acknowledge a reality they themselves were guilty of creating or condoning. Geo's only path for acceptance is by socially conforming and disassociating his past from the present. Yet, the veil of conformity is forever lifted when Geo is confronted with an image of that very past which haunts him. All the agony that Geo strives to suppress surges forth when, during "una passeggiata," he sees a former Fascist Secret Police informer, Lionello Scocca, standing against a marble shaft that "aveva tenuto in piedi, per secoli, uno dei tre cancelli del ghetto" (Bassani, "Una lapide" 116). Even here, it is as if his insidious presence is a warning to the Jew that he is forever under the observant eye of the controlling society. Scocca's presence, however, reveals the underlying hypocrisy and deceit concealed under a facade of normalcy. The audacity of this man who, as perpetuator of hideous crimes and untold suffering, now stands calmly, innocently on a street corner, is too much for Geo—and the silent lie is broken by Geo slapping Scocca, with "due schiaffi secchi" (Bassani, "Una lapide" 118). By condoning the presence of such a criminal the city has fallen back to its corrupt and superficial ways. Yet, in a twist of absurdity, Lionello Scocca is pardoned by the community and it is instead Geo who is criticized for his actions.

From the moment of his reawakening, Geo Josz endeavors to compel the people of Ferrara to remember their past. By appearing publicly in his squalid concentration camp uniform and showing photographs of his dead relatives, Geo is determined to reveal a past of suffering, now overlooked by the public. Throughout the city, however, the immediate reaction is to reject the reminder of a past best forgotten. As one critic observes,

> To the public the man in the ragged camp uniform is a **travestito**—someone in disguise or costume. But in truth, the actual masquerade was Josz in his newly tailored suit strolling at dusk and smiling at lovely girls on bicycles, as if nothing had ever happened to him and his family. (Radcliff-Umstead 58)

This, however, is the masquerade that society accepts; just as the old-line Fascists, "vecchi, ormai inoffensivi" are offered respect, even sympathy in their demure, quiet ways. These are men who appear "tanto più umani, tanto più commoventi e meritevoli di pietà che non l'altro, che non Geo" (Bassani, "Una lapide" 123). Tragically, in Geo's attempt to instill "the lessons of yesterday"[40] his exclusion from the community is sealed. The people fail to display any sense of guilt or profound change. Ultimately, Geo's reintegration into the community proves impossible.

Rejected by the community, Geo seals his exile by disappearing from the city, abandoning it forever. While Geo chooses to leave Ferrara, suicide is often chosen by the individual as the only response possible to exile.[5] Death is not viewed as an escape from life but as the ultimate solace from the exile that is endured. In Bassani's novel *L'Airone,* the protagonist destroys himself because his identity has been shattered. In the midst of despair and endured persecution, self-inflicted death is viewed as the only possible solution. Levi, too, spoke of this consolation in death, in his poem "Verso valle:"

> Fin quando mi obbediranno queste buone membra?
> È fatto tardi per vivere e per amare,
> Per penetrare il cielo e per comprendere il mondo.
> È tempo di discendere
> Verso valle, con visi chiusi e muti,
> A rifugiarci all'ombra delle nostre cure.

In Bassani's short story "Il muro di cinta" we are told that "soli i morti stanno bene" (9) In his novel *Gli occhiali d'oro,* death brings final liberation in the midst of social banishment. Destroyed by the limitations and prejudices of the community, Dr. Fadigati commits suicide as the only response possible to the complete destruction of his identity. Dr. Fadigati's "colpa" lies not in his being

Jewish, but in being a homosexual. Disdainfully accepted, this "vizio di Fadigati" is hypocritically accepted by the community only when it is kept secret.

Through the eyes of the narrator, who is Jewish himself, Dr. Fadigati's exclusion from society parallels his own situation. As the community's rejection of Dr. Fadigati increases, the narrator's sense of isolation grows deeper. The result of being "different," of being Jewish, is felt in numerous experiences that reinforce the individual's sense of fear, solitude and bitterness. The sin of being Jewish, and the persecution because of it, is theorized as the result of the "ira celeste." Thus justified, society punishes the Jew by the promulgation of the "leggi razzionali." Overcome by an "atroce sense di esclusione" that torments the narrator, his future is bleak, one of "persecuzioni e di massacri" that "fin da bambino ne avevo continuamente sentito parlare come di un'eventualità per noi ebrei sempre possibile" (Bassani, *Gli occhiali* 84). From this fear and exclusion, a hatred grows towards the oppressor, an "indicibile ripugnanza, l'antico, atavico odio dell'ebreo nei confronti di tutto ciò che fosse cristiano, cattolico, insomma *goi*" (Bassani, *Gli occhiali* 84). The Jew's "umiliazione, ribrezzo" exists because of the humiliation of a society that has marked him as different—the degradation stemming from the belief that, as Levi warned us, "ogni straniero è nemico."

As society's persecution intensifies, the friendship between the Jewish narrator and Dr. Fadigati's becomes stronger. The narrator accepts and tolerates Dr. Fadigati. By sharing an understanding and compassion that can only be felt with another outcast, exclusion becomes the "ultimate form of social identity" (Radcliff-Umstead 83). Dr. Fadigati is driven to a state of complete isolation—"Ma era possibile durare indefinitamente a vivere così, nella solitudine più assoluta, circondato dall'ostilità generale?" (Bassani, *Gli occhiali* 99) Separated from society, he also suffers from an identity crisis: "Accettare di essere quello che sono? O meglio adattarmi ad essere quel che gli altri vogliono che sia?" (Bassani, *Gli occhiali* 110) Society has lead him not only to hate his true self, and detest the mask he carries to cover it, but to reject the alternative—conformity, which is a type of deception and insanity.

The narrator experiences this same rejection due to his Jewishness. Acceptance by society is impossible as it lies in negating the individual's essential being: "for Fadigati to give up being homosexual or for the narrator to give up being Jewish would mean for each of them to give up their identities—identities that they may not have chosen but which nonetheless define them and without which they would be nothing" (Radcliff-Umstead 83). To be born Jewish is, as Ferdinando Camon observed in an interview with Primo Levi, "una colpa. L'ebreo per il solo fatto di essere nato doveva scontare questa 'colpa': la colpa di esistere" (*Autoritratto* 30).

Thus, the Jew, by being born a Jew, is in automatic exile. This exile, initially caused by historical events, is followed by a profound state of psychic exile. For both Primo Levi and Bassani, exile is experienced physically and psychologically, via their Jewishness. Their writings reflect the moral and psychological anguish of racial persecution and the painful struggle required to maintain one's identity. Bassani is unique in embracing his Judaism; he alone celebrates his "Italian Jewish heritage as the underlying and pervasive theme of his work" (Hughes 115). This contrasts sharply with other nineteenth- and twentieth-century Italian Jewish writers. Natalia Ginzberg and Carlo Levi, as well as Umberto Saba and Italo Svevo, make few comments in respect to their Judaism. Neither do their writings have specifically Jewish characters or themes. Thus, one may ask if their Jewishness influences their writings. If there is a Jewish perspective within their writings, how is it expressed? And is exile, the age old theme of Jewish consciousness, expressed in their writings which seem otherwise lacking in Jewish content?

Many critics have asserted that in Svevo's writings there are no "discernible elements . . . which on first reading might be termed Jewish" (Moloney 52). This seems surprising considering that Svevo was raised and educated within a Jewish environment. In addition, Trieste's Jewish population, relatively large for Italy[52] stood at cultural crossroads with Vienna and its Jewish community, thought and culture. Though Svevo's writings reflect little of his Jewish heritage, his correspondence reveals a writer who has not forgotten his origins. In a letter from London in 1903, he writes his wife: "Kiss my Titinia [Letizia] and remind her of her father who may—as she says—no longer be a Jew but is more wandering than ever." During a later visit to London, Svevo tells us that upon suspecting that there were thieves in the house, he stepped away from the front door "with the prudence that Marco ascribes to my race" (Gatt-Rutter 144)

Is Svevo's Jewish sensibility only reflected in his autobiographical works? The critics Debenedetti and E. Levi, whose essays on Svevo as a Jewish writer are most well known, both detect a Jewish element underlying his writings. While Debenedetti speaks of a "hidden" Jewishness, Levi states that Svevo's "introspective, self-doubting, self-deprecating characters are Jewish types" (Moloney 54). Other critics have made reference to Svevo as being a "psychological Jew" in the sense that his characters reflect

> psychological traits commonly attributed to the Jewish sensibility: a sense of personal oppression made sociable by an acute but gentle self-irony, a passion for introspection and a simultaneous sense of the absurdity of life's logic constantly surprised by fantasy and desire. (Lebowitz 40)

Umberto Saba, himself, called his friend Svevo "psychologically Jewish down to

the very marrow of his bones" (Cited by Weiss 135).

While the characteristics of Alfonso Nitti in *Una vita* and Emilio Brentani in *Senilità* may be viewed as Jewish, these characteristics are also systematic of a historical period. Svevo's "disagio" and "senilità" are a reflection of the reoccurring concepts of the *mal du siècle,* that literary period in which:

> a universal nausea fills the heart of the Slavs, the Germans and the Latins and displays itself in the first in the shape of nihilism, in the second in the shape of pessimism, in us [the Latins] in the shape of solitary and bizarre neuroses. (Furbank 160)

Thus, the traits displayed by Svevo's characters are not exclusively Jewish. Not even his use of humor, which Luti states is "legata alla sua stessa *forma mentis,* che è borghese ed ebraica" (Moloney 55) should be labeled as specifically Jewish. Irony is appealing to and used by many writers. It is, however, Svevo's mode of expressing this irony that is unique. By drawing upon his Jewish heritage, Svevo depicts the humor of a stock Jewish character in his novel, *La coscienza di Zeno.* The protagonist, Zeno Cosini, presents himself to us as a *schlemiel.*

The schlemiel is a literary figure in Jewish, and especially Yiddish, lore. He is the result of the rich culture and tortured history of Eastern European Jewry. Despite centuries of persecution and harassment, the communities strength lay in its marked resiliency. Without succumbing to desperation or defeat, the community "learned to absorb severe shock without abandoning the image of man to which it had pledged itself, and without losing its love or desire for life" (Wisse x). The techniques used to survive, however, inevitably produced some self-disgust and bitterness. Yiddish humor reflects this. It is cuttingly sharp; yet, it preserved sanity in the midst of absurdity.

The schlemiel is the individual whose life-style reflects these conflicts. He is "a fool; not of the charming, wily or saintly variety, but weak, inept and frequently disliked. In spite of his vices, or the humiliations he may suffer, he is a comic hero" (Moloney 60). Indeed, Zeno's failures comically turn into success: he proposes to the three Malfenti sisters and is accepted by the one he doesn't want to marry, who, ironically, proves to be the best wife after all; he is unfaithful to Augusta, yet his infidelity strengthens the marriage; he achieves success on the stock exchange, whereas the handsome and "healthy" Guido Speier fails miserably. While both Guido and Zeno are incompetent as business men, Zeno's awareness of his inadequacies saves him. Guido, instead, is hindered by a false sense of security, which prevents him from seeing his own failings until too late. Zeno's "own defeatist acceptance of inadequacy preserves him where Guido is destroyed" (Furbank 184). Ironically, from Guido's ruin on the stock exchange, Zeno continues to speculate with the firm's remaining

money and is highly successful. As Albert Goldman observes, the schlemiel's power "rests on his daring to lay bare his own weakness and to acknowledge his own limitations. Although he may appear pathetic or absurd, the schlemiel conceals behind his mask a hidden strength: a shrewd sense of self-preservation" (Cited by Weiss 63) His weakness proves to be his strength, for otherwise how could a weakling survive?

Traditionally, the schlemiel's humor is used in self-defense; he bases his life "on the assumption that because he is absurd he cannot be tragic," and thus "he retains the capacity to hope in circumstances which would drive ordinary men to despair" (Moloney 60). This belief comes through in the schlemiel's joking humor, which can be seen in the following:

> Sometime during World War I, a Jew lost his way along the Austro-Hungarian frontier. Wandering through the woods late at night, he was suddenly arrested by the challenge of a border-guard: "Halt, or I'll shoot!" The Jew blinked into the beam of the searchlight and said:
>
> "What's the matter with you? Are you crazy? Can't you see that this is a human being?" (Cited by Wisse 3)

The Jew here is completely rational within the context of an ideal humanism. Yet, given the political reality he is seen as a fool, completely out of line with actual events. Zeno Cosini presents himself as this same fool when, during his morning walk, he is unexpectedly caught in the outbreak of a war. Zeno's walk is interrupted by the threatening warning of a soldier who, at gunpoint, yells at him to go "Zuruck! [Indietro!]." Disgusted with this treatment, he comments: "Pensai che al mio arrivo a Lucinico mi sarei subito recato a protestare dal capovilla per il trattamento che avevo dovuto subire" (Svevo 464-65). Later, upon coming across a battalion that blocks his path, Zeno is again verbally attacked to his utmost amazement. When an official detects Zeno and shouts: "Che cosa vuole quello scimunito?" Zeno is shocked—"Stupito che senz'alcuna provocazione mi si offendese così, volli dimostrarmi offeso virilmente." He continues:

> Gli raccontai che a Lucinico m'aspettava il mio caffelatte da cui ero diviso soltanto dal suo plotone.
>
> Egli rise, in fede mia rise. Rise sempre bestemmiando e non ebbe la pazienza di lasciarmi finire. Dichiarò che il caffelatte di Lucinico sarebbe stato bevuto da altri . . . .
>
> Non era facile di adattarsi di rinunziare al caffelatte da cui distavo non più di mezzo chilometro . . . . E mitemente domandai all'ufficiale:—Ma a chi dovrei rivolgermi per poter ritornare a Lucinico a prendere almeno la mia giubba e il mio cappello? (Svevo 465-66)

In the light of historical happenings Zeno appears the utter fool. Yet, his seemingly misplaced indignation reveals the insanity of the world itself, by "provoking our recognition that in an insane world, the fool may be the only morally sane man" (Wisse 4).

Zeno finds himself in a ridiculous and threatening situation. As the schlemiel, he is also the symbol of the entire Jewish people. As a metaphor for European Jewry, the schlemiel is seen as "the model of endurance, his innocence a shield against corruption, his absolute defenselessness the only guaranteed defense against the brutalizing potential of might" (Wisse 5) The schlemiel's actions are the result of a technique required if he is to survive. In the midst of persecution and oppression, the Jew's weakness, irony and foolishness become his strength and key to survival. Svevo, by presenting us with the character of Zeno, portrays a unique yet, nevertheless, recognizable variation of a stock Jewish type. Through the guise of the schlemiel, Svevo reveals his response to the difficulties of exile.

The critic Giorgio Voghera claims that the Jewish writers from Trieste "non hanno infuso nella loro opera alcunché dello spirito biblico; né di quello sionista; né di quello dell'autentico giudaismo dell'oriente europeo e dei ghetti" (Langella 13). While this is true for both Svevo and Saba, their writings are not completely devoid of any Jewish quality. Their works evolved from "una coscienza ebraica," from the weight of their very heritage. Yet, there works also went beyond a completely Jewish perspective; both writers reflect the universal problems that face all men. As James Joyce realized by making the hero of *Ulysses* a Jew, the protagonist Leopold Bloom is more than just a Jew, for "the Jew with his 'hangups', his self-doubt . . . and his awkward, alienated stance is a twentieth-century symbol for Everyman" (Weiss 140). In his poem, "La capra," Saba specifically indicates that the "viso semita" of the "capra solitaria" is no more than "un verso prevalentemente visivo" (Guglielmino 454-55). Though the animal is identified as Jewish, its pain is an anguish felt by all, "un dolore universale." By transcending his own Jewishness, Saba's poetry expresses the "condizione universale di dolore." Yet, the Jewish condition embodies and intensifies that very pain, for while pain thresholds vary among peoples, the Jewish community's threshold has proven exceedingly high. Just as the "Chinaman" in Vittorini's *Conversazione in Sicilia* symbolizes an utmost solitude, for Chinese solitude, in rural Sicily, is said to make him "più uomo," the Jewishness of the "capra dal viso semita" symbolizes all suffering, yet intensified. While "alienation is . . . a central feature of human existence" (Kaufman xvii) the Jew carries an extra weighted history of it. As Elie Wiesel comments on the meaning of exile for him:

> I experience it [exile] metaphysically because a writer probably experiences certain things more intensely and a Jewish writer even more so.
> (Wiesel and de Saint-Cheron 92)

Thus, Saba's sense of exile extends beyond his being Jewish to an exile that is universal, endured by all human beings. As Carlo Levi observes:

> la capacità di trasformare questa universale angoscia nata nel fanciullo è rimasta nella vita individuale di un uomo, di volgerla in fuori, di esprimerla e trasformarla in universale amore e comprensione. (228)

From his childhood, Saba experienced the pain of being abandoned by his non-Jewish father—"di malinconia fui tosto esperto; unico figlio che ha lontano il padre" (Saba, *Per conoscere Saba* 297).[6] Raised by his Jewish mother, his father became "l'assassino." Expressing his mother's warning in a poem, Saba reveals a painful realization:

> Non somigliare—ammoniva—tuo padre
> Ed io più tardi in me stesso lo intesi:
> Eran due razze in antica tenzone.

The "due razze in antica tenzone" form the two poles of conflict within the poet, a "dissidio" which, Carlo Levi claims, "fu insomma uno dei motivi iniziali e profondi della sua poesia" (229). In "Le fughe," Saba expresses this pain:

> «O mio cuore dal nascere in due scisso,
> quante pene durai per uno farne!
> Quante rose a nascondere un abisso!»

In *Gli anni della psicanalisi,* Giorgio Voghera observes that Saba claimed that "the dilemma of the Triestine Jews was that they had been brought up between two truths, that of their family and that of the surrounding Christian world" (Weiss 134). Even though Saba never distinguished himself as a Jewish writer, his writings are not completely devoid of Jewish influence: his *Gli ebrei* is a collection of short stories dedicated to his colorful memory of the Triestine ghetto and the Jews in his family and his poem "Tre vie" renews cherished memories in the Jewish cemetery. As other Jews, Saba could not escape his birthright. Forced into exile due to Italy's racial laws, Saba first escaped to Paris, followed by a year of hiding in Florence. Hidden in Montale's house in Florence, there lay only a fine line that separated life from the zealous patriot who "per il compenso di 5000 lire a testa" (Saba, *Per conoscere Saba* 60) would send him

to the Germans and his death. His poem "Vetro rotto" captures the oppression and doom that surrounds him:

> Tutto si muove contro te. Il maltempo,
> le luci che si spengono, la vecchia
> casa scossa a una raffica . . . .
> Ti pare il sopravvivere un rifiuto
> d'obbedienze alle cose.
> E nello schianto
> del vetro alla finestra è la condanna.

This poem speaks as well to all those in hiding, whether as a Jew or a partigiano fighting against Fascism. Carlo Levi maintained that Saba's talent lay in his ability to universalize everyday life. While he claims that Saba wove "un filo, una tradizione ebraica" within his writings, "perché il carattere di Saba era profondamente ebraico" (C. Levi 230), it is from this "carattere" that a new identity is found and shared with others. In a verse from "Mediterranee" he defines himself and his poetry:

> Pianse e capì per tutti
> era il tuo moto . . . .

And in "Preludio e fughe" he writes:

> Poche ore serene
> il dolore mi lascia;
> il mio e di quanti
> esseri ho intorno

Saba's pain goes beyond the personal—"Parla interrottamente di sé: ma appunto perché crede nell'esemplarità della propria vicenda esteriore e interiore, perché ritiene che si rispecchi in essa il dramma non di un uomo, ma **dell'uomo**" (Saba, *Coi miei occhi* 13: emphasis mine).

Primo Levi, as Saba, lifts his works to a level of universality. His goal is not to pour out endless indignation, but instead to explore "alcuni aspetti dell'animo umano" (P. Levi, *Se questo* 9). *Se questo è un uomo* is unique in that, as opposed to other Holocaust literature such as Elie Wiesel's *Night* where "the protagonist is initiated into death rather than life," Levi "chronicles the survival of a man from innocence to understanding and from weakness to the strength of self-knowledge" (Gunzberg 82). The suffering endured during exile and the feeling of alienation and pain pave the way for a greater humanity. As Elie Wiesel observes, there is a "creative side of exile." From the ruins of suffering, the writer

must reveal a higher truth, a greater hope—"It is the writer's task to make sure that his writing helps to raise man higher and not to degrade him" (Wiesel and de Saint-Cheron 92-93).

Primo Levi, Giorgio Bassani, Natalia Ginzberg, Italo Svevo, and Umberto Saba all experienced the pain of alienation, the anguish of exile, the sorrows of life. Though each writer reacted differently to the effects of exile, they all shared one common goal—to reach a better understanding of themselves and humanity. "When an Italian Jew wrote of the sufferings he or she had endured, it was not simply **as a Jew**: it was as someone giving testimony on behalf of all the victims of oppression, wherever and of whatever religious origin they may be" (Hughes 65). No matter how subtle their Jewish consciousness, however, they ultimately fulfilled Judaism's highest command. For "the substance of Judaism," Elie Wiesel tells us, is identical to our greatest challenge—the calling "to remain human in a world that is inhuman" (in *Literary Exile* 707).

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Notes

[1]This poem and all further citations of Levi's poetry are taken from *Ad ora incerta*.

[2]*Shemà* means "Hear" or "Listen" in Hebrew.

[3]See Paul Tabori 53-60, for a discussion on exile, Jewish history and the Wandering Jew.

[4]This prayer—from the *Selichos* for Asarah BeTeves, *Siddur Tehillat HaShem 356*—is read on the day which commemorates the destruction of the Temple.

[5]See Radcliff-Umstead 136-46, 157 for a further discussion on death/suicide as a response to and liberation from exile.

[6]Following cited poems are from *Per conoscere Saba*.

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Stealing Home: Flight From Exile in *Il ladro di bambini*

> If I had wanted to make a movie based on ideological premises, I would have produced a sort of *Rocco and His Brothers* for the 1990s; I would have depicted the characters moving from South to North, towards the conflicts of contemporary Milan. But I did not plan to convey a portrait of Italy; I meant even less to confer on the South the edifying task of symbolizing a need for cleanliness. The characters are from the South but they travel from North to South because they are ordered to do so. They have neither roots, nor self-conscience. (D'Agostini)[1]

Gianni Amelio, director of *Il ladro di bambini* (*Stolen Children*) expressed these considerations, after receiving the Special Prize of the Jury at the Cannes Film Festival in 1992. His comments seem to prevent a socio-political interpretation of this movie. Understandably Amelio pays the utmost care in order not to be identified as a "political" movie director: evidently he does not intend to offer clear-cut solutions and, therefore, refuses to simplify the complex social reality of contemporary Italy. On the contrary, Amelio strives to depict a *tranche de vie* characterized by multiple outcomes and open to different interpretations.

Many critics have mentioned the tradition of neorealist cinema as one of the main referents of this work. Some of the most famous works of Italian Neorealism define an interpretive structure for *Stolen Children*. The influence of this artistic movement on Amelio's work does not consist only of quotes and tributes to the director's teachers. It is recognizable as a dialogical relationship with previous works of Neorealism which increases the possibility of signification of the movie.

The purpose of this essay is to analyze some of the themes in the structure of *Stolen Children*, to discuss the dialogical relationship it establishes with the neorealist tradition, and to show how this tradition and the social and political phenomena of contemporary Italy are recognizable as sub-texts which influence the perception of the work, in spite of the director's attempt to deny the symbolic value of the characters he has created. The result is a movie which, from many respects, can actually be considered a *Rocco and His Brothers* for the 1990s.

The following is a brief summary of the plot: the narration begins in Milan, with the arrest of a woman accused of prostituting her 11-year old daughter. The girl and her younger brother cannot be left in the care of other relatives, and the father abandoned them after the family moved from Sicily to Milan. The children must be entrusted to an institution and the task of accompanying them falls completely on a young *carabiniere* (paramilitary policeman) named Antonio. His colleague, who should have shared the assignment with him, instead decides to remain in Bologna, and asks Antonio to take care of the children by himself. Most of the movie describes the vicissitudes of the *carabiniere* and the two children, Rosetta and Luciano, in their voyage towards southern Italy. The first destination is an orphanage in Civitavecchia, a city north of Rome. Adducing reasons having to do with bureaucracy the director of the institution refuses the children admittance. But the real motivations have to do with the sordid circumstances in which the girl was involved. Antonio has no other choice but to attempt to leave the children in care of another institution in Sicily which might accept them. The travel continues: in Rome Antonio and the children make a stop at a station of the *carabinieri*, and then go on towards Calabria. There the young officer decides to visit his sister and grandmother who live in the small town where he was born. In this way the children will be able to recover from the long voyage in the train. Antonio's sister is busy with a reception for a girl who received her first communion, and her brother decides to hide the true identity of his young travel companions. He says that they are the children of a fellow worker who asked him the favor of taking them to Sicily. By this time the involvement of the young officer in the children's lives has become a tangible reality. At the same time Rosetta and Luciano have overcome their previous attitudes, respectively, of defiance and obstinate silence, and they both reciprocate Antonio's manifestation of love and compassion. The climax of the relationship between the *carabiniere* and the children is reached when Antonio decides to stop at a beach in Sicily to swim and then treats Luciano and Rosetta to lunch. They meet two young women from France, who are touring southern Italy, and together they visit the cathedral of Noto. When a thief snatches a camera from Rosetta's hands Antonio is able to catch him and bring him to the local police station. The officer in charge accuses the *carabiniere* of kidnapping the children instead of reporting his failed attempt to leave them in charge of an institution. The movie ends with the three characters who resume their travel by car, trying to reach the orphanage.

The structure of *Stolen Children* shows a dynamic of open and enclosed spaces whose juxtaposition reflects the evolution of the three main characters. Their travel towards southern Italy is depicted by means of their re-appropriation of the open space and of the natural environment. The ocean, the beach, the

sunny summer environment, portrayed in the part where Antonio and the children make a stop at the seaside, contrast dramatically with the initial scenes in Milan, inside the constrictive apartment where the crime had been committed. Significantly the climax is reached in Sicily, where the children were born. During the stop in Civitavecchia, which is a maritime town as well, the characters are still depicted as oppressed by their personal tragedies and victims of the anonymity of bureaucracy. In this phase the scenes are still urban landscapes and mostly enclosed spaces.

The situation's improvement, which is defined during the trip from Lombardy to Sicily, not only builds ties of affection among the three characters, but also posits the beach in Sicily as a temporary destination, where Antonio, Luciano and Rosetta reach the peak of their interaction as a symbolic family community. It is not possible to identify a domestic space that might offer a solid ground. Antonio's relatives' house does not represent an alternative to the corruption enmeshed in the children's lives. The illegality of this place of abode creates a parallel with the unlawfulness of Rosetta's prostitution, suffered in the apartment in Milan. In addition, it is precisely during the reception at Antonio's sister's home that the truth of Rosetta's identity is discovered by an inquisitive acquaintance of the family, who does not fail to notice the striking resemblance between Rosetta and a picture published on the cover of a scandal-mongering magazine. In this way the girl is marginalized once more, and the three characters have no other choice but to leave the house and resume their travel.

The depiction of the problems which follow Antonio and the children in southern Italy is consistent with the director's determination of refusing to offer a vision of a mythical Italian South where everything is positive. This is confirmed by the Sicilian origin of the orphanage director in Civitavecchia, who, refuses all the same to accept the children, and by the character of a Neapolitan *carabiniere* who attempts to talk Rosetta into physical intimacy during their stop in Rome. Flavio de Bernardinis comments on the function of different types of space depicted in *Stolen Children* and on the "radical lack of distinction between open and enclosed space" (41). The author astutely sees Antonio's sister's house as a symbol of the environmental debasement of the Italian nation as a whole: "a house which has just been built, very new, and that in its glamorous precariousness is already ruined and dilapidated" (41). However, I would not extend the sense of degradation to include also the natural environment portrayed in the movie. The house in Calabria does not fulfill an alternative function; rather, its constitutive essence underlines the corruption felt by the characters. On the other hand, the marine landscape is suggested as the space where a temporary regeneration is possible. The scene at the beach coincides with the higher point of the relationship between the characters. Significantly,

Antonio is shown not wearing a shirt, as a final stage of liberation from his official role, which he had begun by abandoning his uniform at the beginning of the journey. For the officer the sea represents a way of reliving for a short moment the joyous experience of swimming in his childhood, bringing him closer to the two children.

But it is especially for Rosetta that swimming in the ocean implies a possibility of psychological evolution. This scene is placed in the structure of the work as a moment of ritual cleansing. The girl's ablution is contrasted with the description of the sexual acts the client forced her to perform. Rosetta tells Antonio that the man maintained that she was dirty and always wanted to wash her himself. "But I'm not dirty! I wash myself every single day!" objects the girl, and in this way she shows an intimate need to recover the physical and moral integrity which she feels she has lost.

In *Stolen Children* the picaresque motif of the on-the-road genre is re-elaborated with specific contents, generated by Italy's cultural and political situation. The travel represents, for the three characters, an unconscious search for their cultural roots, a return to the land of their birth, from which they had been expelled as a result of economic conditions and the lack of jobs. If we go back to Amelio's considerations quoted at the beginning of this article, one could argue that in spite of the characters' absence of political consciousness and determination in re-discovering their roots, the common southern origin of Antonio and the children posits them as significant symbols of the social processes which have modified Italian society in the last decades. It is certainly true that we cannot attribute a class conscience to the children, nor to Antonio, whose actions are compelled by a confused sense of solidarity rather than by conscious and willful acts. But, beyond the narrative and the textual requirements, the movement in space from Milan to Sicily assumes a symbolic value, which supplements the director's attempt of depicting reality as it is. The voyage of the three characters from North to South emblematically reverses the process of emigration from southern to northern Italy that characterized the years after World War II. The search for better job opportunities in the northern regions of the country has involved a great number of people, and Antonio himself and the children's parents represent some of the different outcomes and social problems that this type of mass migration has caused. The beginning of the movie depicts Rosetta's and Luciano's family as being destroyed in the process of adjustment to the new environment. The reconstitution of a utopian family nucleus, composed of Antonio and the children, takes place during their travel southward, therefore, the movement away from the environment of Milan is also significant of the spiritual and affective values which signal the characters' growth; it becomes a metaphor of the inner space that the characters move through in order

to meet one another.

However, Antonio, Rosetta, and Luciano arrive at a southern Italy which, as we have seen, seems as corrupted as the North; still, it is the place where they can begin a process of rejuvenation based on their rediscovery of spiritual values. This endeavor is full of contradictions, seemingly so as the end of the movie exemplifies. The last scene shows Rosetta trying to encourage Luciano, telling him that, most likely, he will be involved in the soccer team at the institution where they are going to be assigned. Also, she affectionately puts his jacket over him, because of the cold morning. This change in attitude between the two children sharply contrasts with the hostility and the physical violence between them in the first part of the movie.

The open ending of the story can be interpreted in various ways. The precariousness of Antonio's house and the unsuccessful attempt to assign the children to the institution in Civitavecchia indicate that Luciano and Rosetta's future in Sicily will not be free of difficulties. But the significant change in the children's perspective is that now they have re-constituted a micro-family unit, although Antonio, who represented contradictorily both a paternal and a brotherly figure, has been forced to re-enter into his official role. At the end of the movie he strives not to show any form of affection towards the children. "Mind your own business!" is the answer he gives to Luciano's inquiries about their future, which reproduces Antonio's non-committal attitude at the beginning of the trip. Significantly, at the end of the movie, the *carabiniere* sleeps in the car, while the children are talking about their future. Sleep and drowsiness form a parallel with his re-entrance into bureaucratic anonymity, where there is no conscience of individual destinies.

The director of *Stolen Children* has discussed the end of the movie and the conflicts he felt: "How is it possible," he asks himself, "to conclude the movie by depicting a main hero who falls asleep? It looks as if everything has been narrated in vain" (D'Agostini). During the same interview Amelio says that Antonio "is not able to do more than what he does, because he cannot make it by himself" (D'Agostini). Thus, the director seems to imply the necessity of collective dynamics, as an alternative value for the marginalized group of Italian society.

This perspective is not limited to the marginalization of the southern community emigrated to northern Italy. Amelio is successful in bridging the problems of southern Italian people with other phenomena of discrimination which are part of contemporary Italian society. In the structure of the movie, Rome is charged with a symbolic value comparable to its importance as the geographical and administrative center of the country. The capital of Italy is described as a magnification of the exclusion processes which victimize Antonio

and the children. The few scenes that take place around the main train station in Rome, the Stazione Termini, show a gypsy woman trying to read Antonio's palm, and a drunken homeless man, from whom Rosetta steals a few sips of beer.

The link with other phenomena of discrimination is carried throughout the movie. It is significant to note the analogy that Antonio's sister offers to her guests, in order to apologize for the disorganization of her house: "We live just like the Albanian people," she says, referring to one of the most recent migrations which have attempted Italy as a final destination.[2] Amelio's interest in the sad outcome of the attempted mass-migration from Albania to Italy is confirmed by the project of his next film, after *Stolen Children*, entitled *Lamerica*, which will deal with the shame and guilt that, in Amelio's opinion, the Italian community as a whole ought to feel regarding the precarious conditions in which the waves of Albanian immigrants are forced to live (D'Agostini). The director maintains that "Italy certainly must have had its political excuses, but, nonetheless it occurred that a people just a few kilometers away from us has remained in a child-like position also because of our responsibilities" (D'Agostini).

It is interesting to note the definition of a "child-like people" used by Amelio, which takes us back to the vicissitudes of Luciano, Rosetta, and Antonio, and confirms the interpretation of these characters as symbols of the infantilized and subordinated position in which the southern Italian community is maintained. The movie can be seen as engaging in an implicit dialogic relationship with recent social and political phenomena that have taken place in Italy. In addition to the issues related to Albanian immigrants, another sub-text which is implicitly discussed is the development of the separatist movements in northern Italy, the Leagues, which have obtained consistent success in the regions of Veneto and Lombardy. Their demagogic rhetoric tends to attribute several problems of contemporary Italian society to the negative influence of the southern Italian community. In fact, the initial proposition of these movements was to separate the Italian territory into a northern and a southern part, and, as a result, force the southerners who live in the North to go back to their place of origin. It should be said that this type of demagogy, as well as the innumerable scandals which have involved traditional Italian parties, have paradoxically resulted in a consistent success of these separatist movements even outside northern Italy.[3] For these reasons, several political exponents of the Leagues have somehow toned down their radical position. Their discrimination against other groups of non-Italian immigrants, African and Albanian, for instance, remains unchanged.

The movie *Stolen Children*, on the other hand, depicts a process of positive affirmation on the part of the three main characters. They re-discover personal values inside themselves while traveling towards their place of origin. They symbolize all southern peoples, and all the immigrants who have chosen Italy as

their new home. Their spiritual growth is a stance against the political infantilization of southern people, as they invert the spatial movement of the emigration from North to South. The end of the process does not signify the necessity of recreating a new ghetto, as the separation envisioned by the politicians of the Leagues clearly implies, but the necessity of spiritual growth in contact with the land of birth.

The theme of emigration, so conspicuous in the structure of the movie, can also be analyzed in reference to autobiographical episodes pertaining to the life of the director. Amelio himself points out that in this work he wanted to portray his personal life to a greater extent than in previous movies: "Antonio is myself, I don't make any effort to identify myself with him" (Piccini 20). The character of the *carabiniere* in *Stolen Children* is, therefore, a reference to the director who left his birth place in Calabria and moved to Rome. But Antonio shares many characteristics with Amelio's father who "had moved to Argentina... emigrated because of poverty, and had left wife and children back home" (Aspesi). The absence of paternal figures in the movie has autobiographical implications, and provides another level of interpretation as a critique of "the uprooting suffered from both fathers and children" (D'Agostini).[4]

In addition to the autobiographical influences and the references to the political situation of contemporary Italy *Stolen Children* also establishes a dialogic relationship with other Italian works of cinematography. Nicola Siciliani de Cumis has compiled a list of definitions used by movie critics at the appearance of the film. Among them are abundant references to the tradition of Italian Neorealism, because Amelio's work shares many characteristics with the movies made in this phase of Italian cinema. The director himself points out that *Stolen Children* is not based on a literary work, but is inspired by a piece of news:

The paper *La Repubblica* published a strange, ambiguous picture. Under the title "Rape in Milan: A Mother Prostitutes Her Daughter," you could see a little girl carried in the arms of a man seen from the back .... The caption said that he was a policeman who was carrying the little girl away from the house where the crime had been committed (Gili 2). This attitude is common to movies like *Shoeshine*, *Open City*, and *The Bicycle Thief* where the news-quality of the text is accompanied by the use of lesser known actors, with relevant roles reserved for children. Another important characteristic of Neorealist cinema, maintained by Amelio, is the author's determination to depict non-bourgeois characters who are capable of feelings, because the upper class "is the only one which has been legitimized as the depository of the sphere of feelings, which, on the other hand, were considered as a luxury for the lower class" (D'Agostini). The refusal to portray the life of the bourgeoisie translates into Amelio's choice of the dialect inflections in the characters' language. In this movie the director maintains that

he did not derive his idea from Visconti as much as he did in previous works, which were often set in the past: "In *Stolen Children* the point of reference is Rossellini, i.e. somebody who takes his inspiration from reality" (Piccini).

In addition to the references to Rossellini, it is possible to identify other works of Italian Neorealism which enhance the meaning of *Stolen Children* by means of their interaction as implied sub-text. The first is *The Bicycle Thief* by De Sica. The evident similarity of the titles—*Il ladro di bambini*, *Ladri di biciclette*—underlines the analogy between the two main characters, both forced into illegality by the social constraints in which they must live. The development of the relationship between the father and the son is also reminiscent of the affection which grows between Antonio and the children. The restaurant scene in *Stolen Children*, where Antonio treats the children to lunch and lets Luciano drink a little wine, reminds the viewer of the part of De Sica's movie where the father decides to spend the last money he has in a restaurant, so that his child will have a few moments of happiness. Antonio is also the name of the character of the father in *The Bicycle Thief*, who, like the *carabiniere* of Amelio's work, is a non-patriarchal figure. Eventually he is protected by his own child, after the passers-by prevent his attempt to steal the bicycle.

La ciociara (*Two Women*), another movie by De Sica, realized in a later phase of Neorealism, depicts a predecessor of the character of the girl. The movie narrates the vicissitudes of a mother and a thirteen-year-old daughter caught in the turmoil of World War II in Central Italy. The daughter is raped by a group of soldiers and becomes the symbol of the condition of dispossessed Italian people during the conflict, and of the violence and humiliation they have to endure. As in the previous movie taken into consideration, the commonality of the name Rosetta, shared by both characters of the young women, permits a deeper interpretation of the violence suffered by the girl in Amelio's movie. It is possible to interpret her as the embodiment of the condition of exploitation imposed on southern Italian people emigrated to the North.

The last film that I would like to discuss in order to shed light on the analysis of *Stolen Children* is *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* (*Rocco and His Brothers*), precisely the work by Visconti mentioned by Amelio in the comments I quoted at the beginning of this essay. Visconti describes a family without a father, which emigrates to Milan from the South, and the dissolution of their unity as a result of the contact with the new environment. Amelio's work, on the other hand, describes a process of intellectual growth, which follows a movement in space opposed to the one in *Rocco and His Brothers*, where a symbolic family is re-constituted while the characters move back to their place of origin. We could say that *Stolen Children* represents a continuation of the narrative themes configured in the conclusion of Visconti's movie. In both works, it is the contact with the

metropolis of Milan that induces the dissolution of the family unit. In Visconti's movie the alternative of the land of origin is created *in absentia*, in the words of Rocco, as a place of ancestral purity. His brother Ciro, on the other hand, does not delude himself about the difficulties that a hypothetical return to the South would present for their youngest brother.

Once more it is the similarity of the characters' names which helps to form analogies of meanings between the two works: the youngest brother of the Parondi family is called Luca, etimologically similar to the name of Luciano of *Stolen Children*. The last scenes of the movie by Visconti show Luca walking towards a future destiny where the possibility of a return to the South remains open as the final destination of a forced exile in which he and his family have been involved. The children in Amelio's movie seem to resume the voyage, beginning at the point where Visconti had left Luca in *Rocco and His Brothers*. The Italian South depicted in Amelio's movies corresponds to both Rocco's hopeful expectations and Ciro's disillusionment: it is a place where the fairy-tale and the magic quality of the contact with the sea can coexist with the realist depiction of the environmental disasters of the South. It remains a point of departure where Luciano and Rosetta can re-define their relationship and continue their process of development and growth.[5]

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Notes

[1]Due to the limited amount of literature published on this movie in English, all the articles that I have consulted are written either in Italian or in French. All the translations of quotes from these languages into English are mine.

[2]As a result of the recent changes in Albania's political climate, a consistent number of Albanian people have tried to reach Italy as undocumented aliens. The migration has been favored by spatial proximity and by decades of misconceptions propagated by the Italian television, which broadcasted across the Adriatic sea the myth of an extraordinarily affluent country. The first groups of refugees were accepted and sheltered, often in the old Albanian communities that had settled in Sicily and Calabria centuries ago. The scarcity of job opportunities in the South has complicated the hope of a thorough involvement of these people in the fabric of Italian society, but, nonetheless, the flow of immigrants continued increasingly. In the summer of 1991 an overcrowded boat carrying approximately 1,000 people left Albania in search of asylum. The occupants were kept for some time in the soccer stadium of Bari and then the Italian government decided that they were to be deported to their own country, probably as a gesture meant to discourage further attempts on the part of the Albanian people.

[3]In a recent issue of *The New York Review of Books* W. V. Harris has published a good overview of the most recent developments in Italian politics.

[4]The movie critic Franco Prono has studied in detail Amelio's previous works, and maintains that the conflict between fathers and children represents a constant narrative theme in the artistic production of the director of *Stolen Children*.

[5]I would like to express my gratitude to the people without whom this article could not have been possible. My friends Carmen Anolfo, Marco Ippolito, and Antonella Panzino have taken time out of their busy schedules to send the majority of the articles quoted in this essay from Sassari, Italy. My brother-in-law and friend Mark Longust has provided insightful commentary on the text. My warmest thanks go to all of them, in friendship. A special "thank you" with love to my wife Bridgett Longust, who has put up patiently with interruptions in her own doctoral work in order to check the quality of my translations from French.

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La perdita della sessualità come conquista della donna pirandelliana

Tutta l'opera di Pirandello presenta fondamentalmente, all'interno di una limitata tipologia femminile—moglie, madre, figlia—un unico tipo di donna, la « vergine martire »: vergine in quanto senza identità sul piano sessuale, e martire in quanto votata all'abnegazione. Paradossalmente, anche—e soprattutto—la madre rientra nella categoria: nobilitata dalla maternità, la donna si dedica totalmente alla sua creatura, dimenticando la propria fisicità nella gioia superiore di questa abnegazione. Come dirà il padre a proposito della madre, nei *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*, « non è una donna, è una madre » (*MN* I, 47)[1]: la donna come essere completo e ambivalente cessa di esistere nel momento in cui accetta il ruolo sociale a lei destinato. In questo contesto, la negazione della propria sessualità è un requisito fondamentale per **ogni** donna che voglia avere un posto, un ruolo, all'interno di una società dove, significativamente, chi distribuisce i ruoli e ne riconosce la validità è solo l'uomo.

Scopo di questo lavoro è dimostrare come la perdita della sessualità femminile, un tema ampiamente sviluppato all'interno del teatro pirandelliano, da mezzo attraverso il quale la donna può conquistare un ruolo socialmente rispettato, diventi lo strumento della conquista di una identità personale e/o professionale indipendente dall'uomo. In ultima analisi Pirandello, che è capace di concepire ma non di accettare la donna come creatura ambivalente, fatta di spiritualità ma anche di fisicità, non riesce a contenere la potenza della donna-natura entro i limiti dei ruoli che invariabilmente crea per lei: la donna sfugge cioè al suo controllo per affermare la propria identità proprio attraverso la rinuncia alla sua dimensione più istintuale, fisica, la sessualità. Nonostante l'abbondanza di testi che si presterebbero ad uno studio di questo tipo, la presente analisi sarà circoscritta a cinque commedie di Pirandello, scritte tra il 1917 e il 1932.[2]

La « moglie » (in quanto tale e in quanto presupposto necessario della madre) senza dubbio riassume meglio di ogni altra figura femminile le caratteristiche della donna pirandelliana ideale, ragion per cui è un personaggio assai ricorrente nell'opera di Pirandello: votata ora al marito, ora ai figli, ora ad

altre giuste cause, la donna esiste per gli altri, non per sé, nella più totale assenza di coinvolgimenti emotivi che superino i limiti della passione platonica. Ne *L'innesto* la non-sessualità della moglie è sottolineata ulteriormente dall'impotenza del marito: dopo sette anni di matrimonio Laura e Giorgio non hanno ancora figli. Questo matrimonio doppiamente asessuato è stravolto (per Giorgio) e rinnovato (per Laura) dalla violenza subita da Laura ad opera di uno sconosciuto. All'interno di questo triangolo tipicamente pirandelliano (l'uomo, la bestia e la virtù, di cui *L'innesto* presenta una ennesima variazione) è Laura che, in nome della vita, riesce ad avere la meglio sul troppo razionale marito. Quella che per Giorgio è un'offesa imperdonabile fatta a lui, più che a Laura (« in nessun altro, più che in me—neppure in lei—può essere più vivo e più atroce, questo orrore! » (*MN* II, 401)) per Laura è il mezzo per realizzare la sua potenziale abnegazione di madre; e mentre Giorgio sente come una condanna l'obbligo alla pietà verso la moglie, perché « ci fosse la colpa, sarebbe offeso l'onore; potrei vendicarmi; è offeso invece l'amore! » (401), Laura accoglie la gravidanza come un dono, e cercherà con tutte le sue forze di coinvolgere il marito in quella che lui chiama la sua « follia » facendo leva proprio sul suo ruolo di moglie:

> la ragione non lo sa; forse non può ammetterlo. Ma lo sa la natura, che è così! Il corpo, lo sa! Una pianta—qua, una di queste piante! Sa che non potrebbe essere senza che ci sia amore! . . . Neanche una pianta potrebbe, se non è in amore! . . . Non sono esaltata! No, mamma. Io so questo: che in me, in questo mio povero corpo—quando fu—in questa mia povera carne straziata, mamma, doveva esserci amore. E per chi? **Se amore c'era, non poteva essere che per lui, per mio marito.** (415; mia l'enfasi)

Ed è grazie alla sua abnegazione totale per il marito e per il figlio che Laura riesce ad averla vinta, ad avere all'interno del suo sterile matrimonio un figlio che, proprio in virtù di questa abnegazione, sarà non più soltanto suo, ma anche di Giorgio. Va sottolineato che la forza di lottare per il figlio, che viene a Laura dal desiderio di essere madre, acquista intensità anche e soprattutto in quanto legittimata dal suo ruolo di moglie innamorata: proprio perché capace di annullarsi totalmente nel marito, di farsi come lui la desidera, di essere, in breve, « come tu mi vuoi », i suoi argomenti riescono a vincere la diffidenza del marito:

> non ho ragionato, io: io ho amato: io sono quasi morta d'amore per te; mi sono fatta tutta tua come nessuna donna mai al mondo è stata di un uomo; e tu lo sai; tu non hai certo potuto non sentirlo questo, che ho voluto averti tutto in me; che mi sono voluta tutta in te . . . . (421)

Il motivo dell'annullamento della donna nell'uomo, che Pirandello svilupperà

ancora in tutte le sue sfumature, è già presente in questa commedia, anche se con un tocco di ribellione: Laura si rivelerà infatti, in ultima analisi, più madre che moglie—Laura Granatella la definisce « il prototipo della Grande Madre dei miti finali » (17)—, e sarà disposta a tutto, anche a lasciare il marito, pur di avere il suo bambino. Ma durante tutta la commedia è profondamente conscia del suo ruolo di moglie e della forza che esso le dà all'interno del suo matrimonio, ed è proprio la potenza della sua dedizione che trasforma il figlio che Giorgio considera illegittimo nel frutto legittimo dell'amore di Laura per il marito; Laura non distingue tra il suo ruolo di moglie asessuata e quella che Giorgio chiama « la tua follia » (421): la sua vittoria morale e sociale (non abortisce e può rimanere come moglie a fianco del marito) è frutto della parossistica abnegazione con cui offre al marito « tutta me stessa! perché tu vedessi tutta me stessa, tua, nel figlio tuo: tuo perché di tutto il mio amore per te! » (421). Laura rinnega la maternità come prova chiave della sua sessualità, e la sublima nel dono del suo amore per il marito. Negando completamente la propria sessualità, dunque, Laura riesce a difendere il suo ruolo di moglie e, conseguentemente, quello di madre. Anche se alla fine si mostra più madre che moglie, Laura è motivata principalmente dal desiderio di salvare, insieme all'amore, il suo ruolo all'interno del matrimonio: « non puoi credere ch'io volessi salvare in me chi ancora non sento e non conosco. Io l'amore volevo salvare! » (421).

Sempre di un salvataggio di matrimonio, ma di tutt'altra natura, tratta *L'uomo, la bestia, la virtù*, dove la sessualità femminile è apertamente messa in ridicolo in una versione quasi parodistica del concetto di virtù coniugale. La protagonista femminile della commedia è, nella definizione dello stesso Pirandello, « la virtuosa signora Perella » (*MN* II, 34), ovvero « la virtù, la modestia, la pudicizia in persona » (43), contemporaneamente moglie e madre e dunque obbligata dai suoi ruoli a negare quella fisicità che è invece testimoniata in lei dalla sua nuova maternità; è proprio per salvare agli occhi del marito e della società questa apparenza di virtù che la signora Perella accondiscende a « preparare la virtù . . . per comparire davanti alla bestia », a farsi « un po' di violenza!» (60), a tentare il marito nelle vesti di una *femme fatale* così da poter legittimare la propria gravidanza. È significativo che, tutta truccata, la signora Perella non si riconosca più—« non sono più io! » (65)—, perchè il trucco nasconde la sua identità di moglie e madre, facendola diventare, « per lui che non capisce altro, . . . **come una di quelle!** » (64; mia l'enfasi). Ma appunto perchè improvvisamente fuori dal suo ruolo, l'unica reazione del marito è una risata, a metà tra il divertito e l'incredulo:

> come ti sei impriastricciata? ah! ah! ah! ah! una bertuccia! . . . Ti sei forse mascherata così per me? Ah, grazie! No, no, no, no, no! . . . non ne compero!

> Senti . . . se non vuoi andare a lavarti, non mi seder di fronte, così conciata! Mi metto a ridere di nuovo. (66-67)

Per il marito la moglie perde dunque ogni connotazione sessuale, ed è goffo e pietoso ogni suo tentativo di uscire dal suo « personaggio ». L'ironia di Pirandello è feroce: la donna può avere un posto nella società solamente se rispetta i ruoli che l'uomo (non la donna) ha eletto a base della medesima: la « virtuosa signora Perella » è resa tale proprio dal marito che, trasformandola nel suo ideale di donna, la investe di una apparenza di virtù che la rende onesta anche agli occhi della società, legittimando il suo ruolo di moglie e cancellando quello di amante. Il problema del sospetto non si pone neppure, perché è impensabile che una moglie-madre possa provare altre pulsioni che non l'abnegazione totale per la sua creatura e/o per il marito. In ultima analisi, la donna dopo il matrimonio non esiste più in quanto tale, si spoglia della sua proteiforme natura per calarsi invece nei ruoli monocromi—ma socialmente accettati—che le vengono affidati. Si potrebbe dunque parlare di sconfitta, eppure è vero il contrario: la donna ha piena coscienza del posto che la società le affida, ed è grazie a questa coscienza che riesce a sfruttare **consapevolmente** l'unica realtà che la società le offre. Pur nella più totale abnegazione, insomma, è capace di prevedere in anticipo le richieste e/o aspettative del marito, e di soddisfarle così da poter mantenere il suo ruolo nella società. L'uomo è prevedibile in quanto agisce in base ai dettami di leggi morali ben definite (in *Non si sa come* Romeo dirà: « le leggi morali . . . per me ci sono . . . e le leggi morali sono umane, e crediamo anche divine » (*MN* IV, 118)); è proprio questa prevedibilità dell'uomo a permettere alla donna di trasformare la sconfitta della sua sessualità (a cui è inevitabilmente costretta da Pirandello) in una conquista sociale e personale. La « virtuosa signora Perella », pur così fissata nel suo ruolo, riesce a manipolare il marito proprio grazie all'insospettabilità che le viene da una virtù data per scontata.[3]

Il potenziale di affermazione personale della donna emerge in maniera più definita nelle commedie più tarde di Pirandello, quelle scritte per Marta Abba, dove, all'interno della medesima rete di ruoli e rapporti sociali ben definiti, « women are depicted in the throes of a far more fundamental struggle, that of establishing for themselves a **persona** which they can recognize as authentically their own » (Caesar 48). È in questa luce che la negazione della sessualità diventa il mezzo per la creazione di una identità personale e professionale indipendente dal riconoscimento maschile. È innegabile il ruolo avuto da Marta Abba come musa ispiratrice delle tarde eroine pirandelliane (e il significato che, alla luce del rapporto tra l'attrice e Pirandello, assume il loro totale rifiuto della dimensione sessuale: un implicito invito a Marta Abba a fare come loro . . . .);

tuttavia questo non dovrebbe far dimenticare che la loro superiorità morale nonché la loro più matura coscienza di sé ha il suo presupposto già nelle figure femminili delle prime commedie di Pirandello.

Il rifiuto della donna sessualizzata, della donna amante, assume connotazioni di esaltazione mistica ne *L'amica delle mogli*, dove viene esasperato e negato il concetto di femminilità: la « femmina » non è più una donna, e in quanto tale non può appartenere all'universo dei personaggi pirandelliani se non per dimostrare la bassezza della propria condizione. È con disgusto che Marta, la virginale protagonista della commedia, si scaglia contro Venzi quando dichiara che preferirebbe una moglie più sensuale ad una che tenta invano di emulare una purezza e verginità che si confanno solo a Marta:

> Io vedo bene, lo vedo bene, come voi vorreste che fosse una donna! Ecco: come l'avete ridotta:—una mostruosa vergogna.—Il vostro stesso vizio, e niente altro! Tant'è vero che ora crede, nella sua inaudita impudenza, anche di poter fare a meno di voi! . . . Non sono mica una santa di quelle che fingono di non saper nulla, io! Sono così, appunto perché so. E Dio m'è testimonio di quanto m'è costato di schifo e d'orrore saperlo e vederlo e supporlo tutti i giorni negli occhi e nei modi delle donne! Oh Dio, anche delle vecchie!—Avevano una faccia, Dio, che poteva esprimere tutto, la gioja se la sentivano, il dolore se lo sentivano, la maraviglia d'esser vive: se ne sono fatta una maschera dove è dipinta solo una cosa, la più laida: il vizio, l'oscenità! (*MN* II, 474)

Nel suo concitato discorso, la cui natura esclamatoria sottolinea lo sdegno di chi guarda dall'alto la misera fisicità dell'uomo (inteso come maschio, come « bestia » in opposizione alla virtù della donna), Marta invoca spesso Dio. Questo dettaglio, altrimenti secondario, stabilisce invece in maniera inequivocabile la sua « non sessualità » come scelta consapevole, e la sua netta superiorità sulle altre donne, nonché sugli uomini che esse conquistano: donna esemplare in quanto puro spirito, negazione della carne, e pertanto sogno—irrealizabile—di quanti hanno l'opportunità di avvicinarla, Marta è l'unica che possa permettersi di nominare Dio con libertà per dar voce al suo sdegno, perché è l'unica che ha fatto della purezza, della verginità monacale uno stile di vita. Ed è in qualità di vergine e martire (Marta si dedica tutta—un'altra forma di abnegazione—alla riuscita dei matrimoni altrui) che Marta si propone come l'ideale pirandelliano della moglie-madre, che risulta superiore all'uomo proprio in virtù della coscienza che ha di sé e del suo ruolo:

> una donna, veramente donna, . . . il premio che nessuno deve sapere, il premio che non si dice: che soffre, in segreto, della gioja che dà, e in questo suo soffrire è anche la sua gioja—gioja sì, gioja sofferta, da cui nasce ancora la vita? il riserbo, la prudenza—quella vera, del cuore che tiene il segreto, perchè ha visto

> e sa, sa tutta la vita dell'uomo che gli si confida; e in questo segreto del cuore non c'è più bisogno di nulla che stia fuori, allora: né legge, né giudizio degli altri; perché può assolvere, in sé, anche un delitto; come condannare, invece, quello che gli altri approvano! L'amante e la madre, **l'amante che si fa madre, e che dice dopo, battendo la spalla, come si batte a un bambino: « Ora basta; sii uomo: non vedere, in me e in te, questo soltanto! »**
>
> (*MN* II, 474; mia l'enfasi)

Nonostante la sua scelta di vita sia conforme in tutto e per tutto all'ideale femminile pirandelliano, resta il fatto che è realizzata fuori dal matrimonio, dettaglio che pone Marta in aperto contrasto con gli altrimenti ben definiti ruoli sociali. Quella che è comunemente accettata—e data per scontata—come la realtà femminile per antonomasia all'interno della famiglia diventa nel suo caso una scelta consapevole al di fuori del nucleo familiare e, pertanto, sfida: libera dalla quotidianità del matrimonio, Marta diventa l'irraggiungibile ideale di ogni uomo, un ideale che, per il fatto di essere incarnato in lei (e pertanto reale) nega che possano esistere altri modi di essere donna. Nel caso di Marta, dunque, la negazione della propria sessualità assume la connotazione di un'aspra critica sociale, ed è qui la sua vittoria: nella critica dell'atteggiamento maschile verso la donna, vista ora come oggetto sessuale, ora come vergine e martire, ma mai come compresenza di questi due aspetti. La sua iniziale sconfitta (Marta dirà infatti a Venzi: « me, intanto, perché sono come sono, nessuno mi volle! » (474)) si riscatta così nella scelta consapevole—e non nella passiva accettazione, legata ad un'imposizione esterna—di uno stile di vita che, rivisitato dal suo nubilato perde il sapore della costrizione e dà vita a un ruolo che esula da quelli tradizionali. Se dunque è vero che Marta vive il matrimonio solo vicariamente, è anche vero che è la sola che, in virtù della propria consapevolezza, può raggiungere una indipendenza che la mette su un piano più elevato anche e soprattutto rispetto all'uomo: Venzi è l'unico che capisce la superiorità di Marta: « ma non capisci », dirà a Fausto, « che ce la fa lei la nostra vita? ce la compone lei? » (468). Questo aspetto demiurgico del personaggio di Marta è la conferma del potere da lei acquisito attraverso la negazione della propria fisicità.[4]

In *Diana e la Tuda* la figura della moglie-vergine trova espressione in maniera paradossale. Tuda è moglie di Sirio solo di nome, perché di fatto il suo ruolo nel matrimonio è quello di modella. Questo connubio di fisicità (tradizionalmente il mestiere di modella evoca l'immagine di una donna equivoca, « facile ») e di purezza (come richiede il ruolo della moglie), che trova una sorta di correlativo oggettivo dal grande potere evocativo nella creazione della statua di Diana, è all'origine del dramma di Tuda: lei che, vita pura (Giuncano la definisce « vita! Vita! » (*MN* I, 257)) desidera in Sirio l'uomo, e non l'artista, si piega ad assumere un ruolo che la fissa entro una forma derubandola sia della

sua dimensione sessuale che della vita. Tuda appare così doppiamente sconfitta: come moglie (in quanto mutilata nella sua fisicità) e come donna (in quanto privata della vita, che viene trasferita da lei a Diana). L'amore che Tuda prova per Sirio, e che le fa accettare la sua paradossale proposta, è frustrato non tanto—o non solo—dalla assenza di fisicità nel loro rapporto, ma anche e soprattutto dallo sprezzante disinteresse che Sirio dimostra nei confronti di Tuda come donna, nonché dalla sua rivalità con Sara. Ma le due donne, che si fronteggiano convinte di combattere ad armi pari, si trovano invece su due piani diversi agli occhi di Sirio: è Tuda l'unica che ha potere su di lui, un potere che le viene dal suo ruolo di modella; ed è come modella che infatti lo tradirà, nell'unico modo possibile di ferire, se non l'uomo, l'artista. Ma non è solo grazie al perfido influsso di Sara che Tuda acquista coscienza del suo potere su Sirio. Fin dall'inizio infatti si dimostra di gran lunga superiore agli uomini (ovvero, agli artisti), quando dice a Giuncano:

> eh, posso anche far finta d'essere senza pensieri—per malizia. Combatto con gli artisti! Fingo di parlare come a caso; volto il capo un pochino, senza che me ne faccia accorgere; lo piego; lo alzo; sporgo appena appena una mano; **guai a far vedere che sia io, la modella, a suggerire: no:** io ho detto anzi una sciocchezza; ho fatto un atto, così: **il pensiero è nato in loro**. E ne sono così sicuri che me lo dicono: « Oh, sai? sto pensando che . . . codesta mossa . . . » oppure: « Zitta! mi nasce l'idea di . . . ». E io, seria: « Che mossa . . . » oppure: « Che ho detto? »—Bisogna pure fare così con certuni. Ma con certi altri, no. Con questo no, per esempio [allude a Sirio]. (261; mia l'enfasi)

È Tuda (e dunque la donna) che ha il pieno controllo della situazione: gli artisti (ovvero, gli uomini) sono tutti « catalogabili »—anche Sirio—e dunque prevedibili. La condiscendenza che Tuda dimostra è dunque frutto non dell'accettazione passiva del suo ruolo, ma della consapevolezza del ruolo altrui, oltre che del suo. È proprio questa consapevolezza che sta alla base del suo potere, e che mette Tuda in certo qual modo sullo stesso piano, *mutatis mutandis*, di Marta ne *L'amica delle mogli:* difatti, anche lei come Marta riesce a rendersi indispensabile. Venzi osserva che

> le nostre mogli non possono più farne a meno; sono nelle sue mani, felici di starci; . . . non sanno più parlare né vestirsi, né muoversi senza di lei; e ne sono gelose, sì, ma tra di loro, appena temono che ella voglia bene più all'una che all'altra. E guaj a toccargliela! (*MN* II, 468)[5]

La gelosia di Sirio ha davvero molto in comune con quella delle mogli, per quel suo desiderio di possesso assoluto che lo rende geloso—si noti—non degli altri **uomini**, ma degli altri **artisti**. Inoltre, Tuda gli è assolutamente indispensabile

per finire la statua, e nessun'altra modella può servire allo scopo. Come le mogli non riescono più a fare niente senza Marta, così Sirio senza Tuda non sa più lavorare; come osserva Giuncano parlando con Sara,

> **Giuncano:** —fingete di non capire—
> **Sara:** —che non può più fare a meno di lei?—
> **Giuncano:** —che ormai non può più finirla, quella statua, se non con lei—
> **Sara:** —Se è vero ciò che ha sempre detto. . .
> **Giuncano:** —Ma non è vero niente! E se n'accorge adesso che sente mancarsi . . . il dono che lei faceva di sé, della sua vita, a quella statua! (279)

La statua è dunque il fulcro di questo paradossale matrimonio, l'unico modo per Tuda « di vivere davanti agli occhi di lui » (279). *Diana e la Tuda* si presenta così come una metafora del rapporto coniugale, visto—anzi, sublimato—attraverso l'arte. Il rapporto tra marito e moglie si confonde con quello tra artista e modella, ma entrambi si risolvono nell'opposizione di vita e forma: Tuda, dopo avere accettato di diventare forma, e di darsi così tutta a Sirio (una nuova forma dell'abnegazione tipica della moglie) si salva scegliendo la vita che Sirio tenta fino all'ultimo di distruggere per sublimarla in una forma morta; alla fine Sirio morirà per mano di Giuncano proprio per aver spinto troppo in là il suo sogno di perfezione.

Un aspetto interessante di questo complesso rapporto (non)matrimoniale è che, pure entro i suoi angusti limiti e con grande sofferenza, Tuda riesce in certo qual modo ad affermare la sua identità di donna (e, indirettamente, anche di moglie): di donna in quanto rifiuta di essere vista da Sirio soltanto come modello di perfezione statuaria; di moglie perché la sua fuga mette Sirio di fronte al suo bisogno di Tuda. Tuda è costantemente—e dolorosamente—consapevole della sua posizione e dell'uso a cui Sirio l'ha destinata, ma accetta entrambi coscientemente, in virtù del suo amore e della sua abnegazione; anche nel suo caso, è questa consapevolezza che la rende superiore a Sirio, che invece non si rende conto né di cosa sta facendo a Tuda, né di ciò che lei sta facendo a lui, accecato dalla frenesia di finire la statua. Di lui Giuncano dirà che trasformava Tuda nella creta « senz'intenderlo » (279), e che « **se n'accorge adesso** che sente mancarsi tra il pollice e la creta il dono con cui lavorava . . . il dono che lei faceva di sé, della sua vita, a quella statua! » (279; mia l'enfasi). Anche nel caso di Tuda, dunque, si può parlare di una scelta dolorosamente cosciente della dimensione « asessuata », scelta che, pur « legata ad una triste realtà di soggezione » (Bocchino 132) garantisce a Tuda quella superiore consapevolezza che le permette di affermare, in ultima analisi, la propria identità di donna contro quella di modella-moglie.

Trovarsi, che riassume in sé molti dei motivi dell'opera pirandelliana, presenta la complessa vicenda di Donata Genzi, attrice tormentata in cerca di un'identità, di una vita da vivere in prima persona e non vicariamente, attraverso i suoi personaggi. Nel suo caso la scelta finale di restare sola (ovvero di rinnegare la recente scoperta della propria sessualità) è complicata dalla sua realtà di attrice: per Pirandello infatti il/la vero/a artista non può che seguire fino in fondo la propria vocazione e optare naturalmente per la sublimazione della propria dimensione fisica in quella artistica. Arte e vita non sono dunque compatibili, ma la prima—nettamente superiore all'altra—dà all'artista la possibilità di andare al di là della fossilizzata realtà dei ruoli sociali (ovvero, della vita) per entrare, attraverso l'arte, in una dimensione più libera. Il destino di Donata Genzi, dunque, che è descritta fin dal principio come una vera attrice, è segnato fin dall'inizio: l'unica dimensione possibile per lei è l'abnegazione totale per il suo pubblico, il rifiuto di esistere altrimenti che come artista. « Un'attrice non è più definibile come donna », osserva Salò, non perché reciti anche nella vita e si nasconda dietro i suoi personaggi così da sfuggire ad ogni definizione, ma perché « la vera attrice . . . che "viva" sulla scena, e non che "reciti" nella vita . . . [non è] una no; ecco: tante donne! E per sé, forse, nessuna» (*MN* IV, 134). E, davvero, è questo il dramma originario di Donata (Alonge 215), quello di non « trovarsi ». Nel primo atto Donata non ha ancora capito che la sua scelta professionale di « evadere! Trasfigurarsi! Diventare altri! » (*MN* IV, 140), è la vera e unica chiave della sua vittoria come donna. C'è senza dubbio un aspetto femministico in questa scelta, che « esprime in pieno l'insoddisfazione e l'infelicità specifica della condizione femminile » (Alonge 215) costretta entro gli angusti limiti di ruoli che non rendono giustizia alla complessa natura della donna; ma il problema di Donata è appunto questo: la sua scelta di purezza nasce come una sfida, dettata più dal desiderio di sfatare l'equazione maschilista tra attrice e donnaccia che da una convinzione maturata dentro di sé liberamente. Donata reagisce al limitato e limitante concetto maschile dell'attrice, cosicché la sua scelta è in ultima analisi sempre determinata dall'uomo. E infatti Donata sente dolorosamente il peso della sua rinuncia alla dimensione sessuale, che crede esserle necessaria per « trovarsi ». Tuttavia, la scoperta che ne fa con Elj non appaga le sue aspirazioni, e la vita che scopre con lui non la soddisfa. In quanto vera artista, Donata si trova su un piano superiore rispetto alle altre donne: non è per lei quella « maraviglia di esser vive » (*L'amica delle mogli*, *MN* II, 474) che le altre provano; l'atto sessuale non la arricchisce minimamente: « e poi », confesserà a Elisa, « per non provarci in fondo—ti giuro—alcun piacere; anzi, se debbo dirti, una vera sofferenza » (*MN* IV, 158). E proprio perché su un livello più alto non solo rispetto alle altre donne, ma anche agli uomini (in questo caso a Elj) Donata non può scendere al compromesso di

diventare « come tu [Elj] mi vuoi », di dedicare la sua esistenza ad un uomo solo. Elisa, nel tentativo di rassicurarla, la invita ad avere pazienza e ad aspettare il momento in cui imparerà ad amare Elj « con lui »: « quando amerai **con lui—allo stesso modo e allo stesso tempo che lui**—sarà un'altra cosa . . . vedrai... » (159; mia l'enfasi). Ma tutto questo non è per Donata, che vive, ancora senza rendersene conto, in una dimensione che esclude la sessualità. La sua scoperta finale, quella che finalmente le farà trovare la sua dimensione di donna, sarà appunto che la vera vita è in fondo proprio quella da cui inizialmente era fuggita: il teatro. Nella risolutiva conversazione con Elisa infatti afferma:

> ma credevo, capisci? che appena entrata in una vita mia, subito mi si sarebbe chiarito tutto; che sarei uscita, intendo, dall'incerto in cui vagavo prima. Ma che! Non è vero! È peggio! . . . [Nella vita] **non sei più tu sola**, in mezzo a tutto questo increato che vuol crearsi e non ci riesce—***non sei più libera!*** E allora . . . allora dove la vita è creata liberamente, è là, invece, nel teatro! Ecco perché mi ci sono sempre trovata subito, sicura—là sì! E il vago, l'incerto che sentivo prima, non dipendevano dal non avere io ancora una vita mia: ma che! no! è peggio, è peggio averla! Non comprendi più nulla se t'abbandoni perdutamente. Riapri gli occhi, e se non vuoi lasciarti andare a tutto ciò che è solito, che diventa abitudine, solco, monotonia . . . allora è tutto incerto di nuovo, instabile; ma con questo: che non sei più come prima; che ti sei legata.
>
> (160; mia l'enfasi)

È interessante che in questo momento di suprema apertura mentale, in cui finalmente raggiunge una consapevolezza profonda della propria dimensione sia di attrice che di donna, Donata individui l'identità tra solitudine e libertà, comprendendo che la seconda può esistere solo insieme alla prima. Viene così ribadito il concetto già espresso attraverso il personaggio di Marta (*L'amica delle mogli*), ma con accenti diversi: per Marta l'alternativa si poneva all'interno della vita stessa, tra **libertà dal** o **prigionia nel** ruolo di moglie. Donata ha invece la possibilità di scegliere tra la monocromia della vita « umana » e l'appagante varietà di una vita « sovrumana », quella del teatro, che non solo permette di interpretare—e così sconfiggere—ogni ruolo, ma si pone anche come unica possibilità di vita vera.

È con questa scelta finale e definitiva che Donata può finalmente recuperare la sua dimensione di donna: dopo l'uscita di Elj dal teatro, infatti, ritrova la sua ispirazione e conquista il pubblico ancora una volta; alle congratulazioni che riceve come attrice risponde: « ancora dite dell'attrice? No! No! **Io mi son sentita felice come donna!** come donna! Felice di poter ancora amare! **Questa era la mia vera vittoria!** » (171; mia l'enfasi). Questa vittoria, tuttavia, può avvenire solo senza coinvolgimenti fisici (e infatti avviene solo quando Elj lascia

il teatro); ma di questo ormai Donata è pienamente cosciente, ed è pronta ad accettare senza riserve la verità che le si è rivelata nell'incontro con Elj: in lei l'attrice coesiste con la donna in un'unità inscindibile (« vera così—come sono—io, io nella vita, come nell'arte » (172)), ed è l'arte che ha la meglio sulla vita, quando, significativamente rimasta **sola** nella sua stanza d'albergo, Donata inizia a recitare una scena della commedia appena rappresentata: la stanza si dilata allora in modo che

> l'arco dell'alcova si sarà schiuso in mezzo e allargato da una parte e dall'altra, lasciando in mezzo un vano in penombra come d'una sala di teatro, di cui quell'arco così allargato venga a figurare come il boccascena di un palcoscenico illusorio. (173)

Non solo, dunque, la vita è teatro, ma il teatro è vita che « sublima l'impulso sessuale nell'arte » (Bini, *Teatro* 56) e perciò è ad essa superiore: l'alcova, il simbolo per antonomasia dell'amore fisico, si trasforma in palcoscenico. L'ultima battuta di Donata—e della commedia— « bisogna crearsi, creare! E allora soltanto, ci si trova » è l'epitome della superiorità dell'arte sulla vita, e si pone come alternativa alla prigionia dei ruoli cui questa costringe. Così, mentre il personaggio interpretato da Donata è « murata, murata, senza via di scampo; in questo concetto che tutti si son fatto di me » (174), Donata, forte di una nuova consapevolezza di sé come donna e come attrice è libera, finalmente libera di crearsi non come un uomo la può volere, ma come lei stessa si vuole.

Da Laura Banti a Donata Genzi la donna pirandelliana ha subito una vera e propria metamorfosi per quanto riguarda la sua capacità di autodefinizione: è passata da essere « come tu [l'uomo] mi vuoi » ad una più cosciente autodefinizione che si verifica senza interventi esterni; tuttavia non sembra esserci stato alcun mutamento dei parametri entro cui questa definizione può avvenire, che rimangono quelli della negazione della sessualità. È evidente che questa costante assenza di fisicità è da riportarsi alle fobie di Pirandello in materia sessuale, alla sua incapacità di accettare come dimensione vivibile una realtà che, facendo « chiudere gli occhi » (la ricorrente metafora di *Trovarsi*) ottunde la ragione; è tuttavia vero che le sue eroine acquistano forza e dignità tragica proprio grazie a questa « mutilazione » cui Pirandello costantemente le costringe. In ultima analisi infatti, è proprio attraverso la cosciente accettazione della negazione della propria sessualità che le sue figure femminili si avviano verso la consapevole realizzazione di se stesse, riuscendo così a sfuggire ai limiti della « parte » che sono condannate a sostenere. La donna è sempre capace di adattare creativamente il suo ruolo alle proprie necessità, di piegarlo, insomma, alle sue esigenze, togliendogli la tradizionale connotazione di un « imperativo sociale » da accettare passivamente, e facendolo invece profondamente suo.

È assai dubbio che Pirandello abbia coscientemente scelto di dare alla donna una possibilità di riscatto che, mostrandola superiore all'uomo, ha un vago sapore di femminismo; Pirandello infatti si identificava in ultima analisi con il punto di vista maschilista dei suoi personaggi maschili. D'altra parte è vero che, anche se la conoscenza di Marta Abba lo ha certamente influenzato nella creazione delle sue eroine, fino dalle prime commedie le donne pirandelliane presentano una sorta di « superiore » coscienza rispetto agli uomini che sono loro accanto. Tutto questo non fa altro che confermare che il tentativo di Pirandello di razionalizzare la donna (e, con lei, la vita), riducendola entro categorie accessibili all'uomo « ragionatore » (madre, moglie, figlia, amante) è eroico, ma fallito in partenza, perché la donna sfugge ad ogni limitante definizione, e lo dimostra facendosi **apparentemente** « come l'uomo la vuole », ma ricreandosi **in realtà** « come lei stessa si vuole » all'interno della dimensione asessuata che, sola, le è concessa da Pirandello.

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Note

[1] D'ora in poi ci si riferisce alle *Maschere nude* con *MN*.

[2] *L'innesto*, (1917); *L'uomo, la bestia, la virtù*, (1919); *Diana e la Tuda*; (1926) *L'amica delle mogli*, (1928-29); *Trovarsi*, (1932).

[3] Anche Giorgio, che in *Non si sa come* passa moltissimo tempo lontano da Ginevra, dà per scontata la virtù della moglie proprio come fa il signor Perella, come dimostra questo veloce scambio con Romeo:

Giorgio: Oh, io [le mie scappatelle] non le ho mai nascoste a mia moglie; la dovrei stimar stupida altrimenti, da non supporre che stando così a lungo lontano . . . . Si farebbe un cattivo concetto di me!

Romeo: Mente una donna, eh? deve sapere aspettare! ed è una colpa gravissima se non sa aspettare! . . . è stabilito e non si discute nemmeno!

[4] La tragica conclusione della vicenda, che costringe Marta, questa volta per motivi diversi, a restare per sempre sola, non deve trarre in inganno. Infatti anche qui la sua sconfitta è solo apparente, in quanto permette a Marta di mantenere la sua indipendenza, di affermare cioè la propria identità da sola, senza interventi esterni (maschili). La sua ultima battuta ribadisce l'idea della verginità come scelta cosciente (« verginità » intesa come assenza di contatto fisico sia sessuale che sociale) : « Insomma, come debbo dirvi d'andarvene?—Lasciatemi sola! voglio restar sola!—Sola,—sola,—sola!— » (487).

[5] Non solo le donne, però, ma anche gli uomini, sono gelosi di Marta, ed è appunto la gelosia di uno di loro (lo stesso Venzi) all'origine della tragica conclusione della vicenda.

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Holy Alliance: Saint Catherine of Siena and the Paradox of Flesh

Saint Catherine of Siena believed radical asceticism would bring her closer to God. She denied all bodily needs, among them food, water and sleep. She flagellated her body and endured other self-imposed tests of will. Through these practices the Saint rebuked the world of corporeality, attempting to conform herself to the divine will. Through her asceticism, work and writings, Catherine created her own brand of religiosity. Her standards were very different for herself than those of the individuals she counseled, but the vision which lay at the foundation was the same. Although the practices and beliefs of Catherine were common for female medieval mystics, her behavior and rhetoric reveal a distinct ideology. Catherinian doctrine is defined through its paradoxical treatment of corporeality. Catherine maintained that man must battle physicality at every turn; yet only through the suffering flesh of the crucified Christ was salvation possible. This ambivalent judgment of body will be explicated through a biographical description of the Saint's ascetic practices, followed by an analysis of the theology represented in the letters of Catherine. Both her life and letters reflect the ambiguous central role flesh played in her ideology.

The roots of the Saint's radical piety lie in the events of her childhood and adolescence.[1] On March 25, 1347, Catherine Benincasa was born along with a twin sister, Giovanna. Her mother, Lapa Piacenti, chose to breast feed the future saint and sent her sister to a wet-nurse. This was to become significant. Giovanna died, Catherine lived. In a few years, Lapa gave birth to another girl, who was named Giovanna after the dead twin (Bell 29-30). As Catherine grew up, she lived with a constant reminder that her sister had died and that she was the chosen one, the one her mother had breast-fed. This leitmotif set the tone for Catherine's life.

The Saint's first religious vision, at the age of six or seven, reflected Catherine's sense of having been chosen. The story tells that she was returning with her brother from an errand outside the city walls: "In the sunset sky . . . she saw a loggia full of radiant light; Jesus, robed all in white like a bishop . . . smiled at her. Behind him were several saints, also dressed in white, and a shaft of light,

a sunbeam, came from him and fell on her" (Bell 35). At her brother's call Catherine looked away; when she looked back, the vision was gone, yet not before the young girl had seen the light stream from Jesus directly to her. She felt that she was to be one with Him. The Saint's reaction might be considered extraordinary for a young child; instead of running home and announcing to everyone what had happened, Catherine meditated on the content of what she had seen, attempting to discern whether it was good or evil (Bell 35). This would seem to be an indication that even as a young girl Catherine saw her relationship with God as an intensely personal and meditative one.

After her vision, the young Catherine made a first and lasting decision to devote her life to God. The year after it occurred, she took a vow of virginity. However, her final conversion to a religious life did not come until Catherine's older sister Bonaventura died. She had been Catherine's favorite sister and had encouraged her little sister to display a bit of vanity and wear pretty clothes. Rudolph Bell writes about this in his book, *Holy Anorexia*: "the older sister made Catherine understand that every young woman had a right to adorn herself and that such beautification was in no way displeasing to God. The girl much admired and loved Bonaventura, and under no circumstances could she consider her sister's advice sinful" (Bell 37-38). Bonaventura had starved herself in an attempt to reform her dissolute husband. The fast was successful in convincing the young man to amend his behavior. Soon after Catherine had agreed to display some vanity and beautify herself, Bonaventura died in childbirth. Caroline Walker Bynam writes on the significance of these events in the young Saint's life:

> Catherine thus had in her beloved sister Bonaventura a graphic illustration of the success that fasting could achieve and the dangers of marriage and pregnancy. . . . Furthermore, since one source reports that there was talk later of marrying her to Bonaventura's widower, we may also suspect that Catherine felt guilty about surviving as a replacement for both her sisters and thus determined to substitute for their suffering rather than for their pleasure.
>
> (Bynam, *Holy Feast* 167)

In these early years, there were already glimpses of the asceticism that the Saint would come to embody. Catherine began fasting as child. There are reports that she and some playmates secretly flagellated themselves together. There is also the tale of Catherine running off to a cave to become a hermit. Nonetheless, outward manifestations of piety did not occur until after Bonaventura's death.

> The future saint blamed herself for Bonaventura's death, convinced herself that it was her own brief flirtation with worldliness that had brought God's just

> wrath not upon her but upon her sister. Once again, as in her infancy, Catherine lived in the place of another. . . . [S]he turned inward, meditated deeply upon how her sin had brought about the death of someone she loved, and determined to have no more to do with the world. (Bell 38)

In an act of penance and self-hatred Catherine cut off her long blond hair; her parents, who were intending for her to soon marry, were furious. In retaliation, they made Catherine assume the role of servant in their house (*Letters* 32).

The complete conversion to ascetic practice would occur for Saint Catherine when her third sister, Nanna, as she was called, died—the child who had been named Giovanna after Catherine's dead twin. On April 18, 1363, less than a year after Bonaventura had died giving birth, Nanna died from a plague; Catherine was sixteen. At this point, the Saint openly declared her intention never to marry. This is a testimony to her personal strength and conviction, as the familial pressure for her to marry had increased. Catherine was the last daughter left; her parents wanted to use the marriage to secure certain business allies for the family's wool-dying enterprise (Bell 39-40). At this point in her life, the young Saint made a pact with God; if she would devote her life to him, then he would protect her family both in this life and the next one.

> Oppressed with personal guilt over her own survival and the deaths of her sisters, [Catherine] achieved inner peace by conceiving in her mind a bargain for all eternity. She would not be a murderer, but a savior: for her twin Giovanna, for her beloved Bonaventura, and for little Nanna. The price to be paid was . . . a life of hard penance and solitude. (Bell 41)

For a long time, Catherine's family would not accept her choice to renounce marriage and a normal lifestyle. They took away her room where she had meditated, flagellated herself, and held nightly vigils of sleep deprivation. Her family forced her to sleep in her brother's room and to work all night and day; they did anything that they could conceive of to force Catherine to act like other girls her age. It is during this period that the Virgin first began to realize the power and security of one's own mind. She would later say, "my cell . . . will not be one of stone or wood, but that of self-knowledge" (Lawrence 287-88).

> [Catherine] could not fight the physical forces brought to oppress her, but with sufficient mental effort she would change their meaning. Raymond of Capua [Catherine's confessor and first biographer] . . . explains how Catherine came to realize that a private room would be unnecessary if she could construct for herself an interior oratory. He recalls . . . her advice to him when he had been burdened with worldly cares: "Build a cell in your mind from which you can never escape." It was as an adolescent that Catherine built her mental fortress,

> and if . . . she became its prisoner . . . the oratory proved impenetrable to the world around her. (Bell 42)

Bell's analysis in the paragraph above is accurate; this period of punishment forced the Saint to discover an even deeper personal conviction. Since she was no longer able to have physical solitude, Catherine was led to believe that although real solitude could not be found in the physical world, it could be found in the depths of one's own soul.

Finally, her family relented to Catherine's wishes not to be married. Her father allowed her to have her room back where she could continue her ascetic practices at will. The Virgin commenced a three-year self-imposed exile.

> She subsisted on bread, water, and raw vegetables. She wore only rough wool, and . . . an iron chain bound so tightly against her hips that it enflamed her skin. For three years, she observed a self-imposed vow of total silence except for confession, and this she maintained even though she lived at home. . . . [S]he conquered fatigue and reduced her sleep to as little as thirty minutes every two days on a wooden board. . . . Three times a day she flagellated herself with an iron chain, once for her sins, again for the living, and then for the dead. . . . [E]ach beating lasted for one and one half hours and blood ran from her shoulders to her feet. . . . [T]he once sturdy girl . . . lost half her body weight. (Bell 43)

Catherine's desire to suffer was so extreme that nothing could deter her. When her mother took the Virgin to the hot springs in Vignoli in order to remove Catherine from her self-imposed torture, the Saint flung herself into the part of the canals where the hot sulfuric water flowed into the pool—the burn of the boiling waters surpassing the pain of any flagellation.

Catherine's most frequently discussed ascetic practice is her self-starvation, her "holy anorexia."[2] Beginning when she was not yet sixteen, Catherine restricted her diet to bread, uncooked vegetables and water. The next step toward complete rejection of terrestrial sustenance came five years later.

> While dressing the cancerous breast sores of a woman she was tending, Catherine felt repulsed at the horrid odor of the suppuration. Determined to overcome all bodily sensations, she carefully gathered the pus into a ladle and drank it all. That night she envisioned Jesus inviting her to drink the blood flowing from his pierced side, and it was with this consolation that her stomach "no longer had need of food and no longer could digest." (Bell 25)

In this vision, Christ told her to give up her solitary ways and go forth in the company of worldly men and women. This pivotal mystical experience—

Catherine considered it her "mystical espousal" with Jesus—culminated three years of solitude with the epiphany that love for God is intrinsically connected with serving others. At this juncture, the Saint started to go out to those in need, driven by the unyielding conviction that this was her duty (*Letters* 2). Although her physical isolation then ended, her self-deprivation did not; by the age of twenty-five, it is reported that she ate absolutely nothing.

Her family and friends began to suspect a diabolic trick. Frate Tommaso dalla Fonte, her first confessor, insisted that she ignore what he believed was a demonically-induced impulse and required that she eat once a day. Although Catherine was more energetic when she did not eat, she obeyed his orders. Even when she became sick and weak, Tommaso would not relent. He forced her to eat until she arrived nearly at death. Finally he accepted the Saint's logic "that it would be better to die from fasting than from eating and [told] her 'to do as the Holy Spirit suggests you to'" (Bell 25).

Raymond of Capua, Catherine's mature confessor, dearest friend, and first biographer, believed the Saint capable of surviving without food due to the Lord's will. He believed that "divine grace so infused her body and deadened her life fluids that the nature of her stomach was transformed." Raymond wrote: "Not only did she not need food, but she could not even eat without pain. If she forced herself to eat, her body suffered greatly, she could not digest and she had to vomit" (Cited by Bell 25). Bell writes about the strange phenomena of Catherine's ascetic regime:

> Certainly her habits were difficult to understand. She drank only a little cold water and chewed on bitter herbs while spitting out the substance. . . . [S]he seemed about to die at any moment, yet, until the very end, at the opportunity to honor God or do an act of charity, and without medicine, she became robust, vigorously out walked her companions, and never grew tired—in short, she became hyperactive. She took nourishment from the host alone. . . . Raymond asked Catherine whether when she did not receive communion her appetite was stimulated. Her answer . . . reveals continued mental effort to suppress bodily urges . . . : "When I cannot receive the Sacrament, it satisfies me to be nearby and to see it; indeed, even to see a priest who has touched the Sacrament consoles me greatly, so that I lose all memory of food." (Bell 25)

However, many of her contemporaries were not convinced that Catherine was sustained by this eucharistic piety alone. Detractors accused the Virgin of self-aggrandization and said that she ate secretly. Others thought that she should heed Jesus' command to his disciples in Luke 10:7: eat and drink that which is placed before you. Still other disparagers shouted: "Who was she to refuse to do what Christ on earth, his glorious mother, and the Apostles did? They ate and

drank; a truly holy person ought to seek never to be singled out for attention and therefore in all matters follow common customs" (Bell 26). There were also those who believed that she was engaged in a symbiotic relationship with the devil.

> [T]o demonstrate that she was not possessed, or possibly the even more serious charge that she might be a witch, Catherine began to eat once daily and in the company of her companions. Raymond of Capua . . . describes her lifestyle: ". . . her stomach could digest nothing and her body heat consumed no energy; therefore anything she ingested needed to exit by the same way it entered, otherwise it caused her acute pain and swelling of her entire body. The holy virgin swallowed nothing of the herbs and things she chewed; nevertheless, because it was impossible to avoid some crumb of food or juice descending into her stomach and because she willingly drank fresh water to quench her thirst, she was constrained every day to vomit what she had eaten. To do this she regularly and with great pain inserted stalks of fennel and other plants into her stomach, otherwise being unable to vomit." (Bell 29)

Thus, despite the mandate to attempt to eat and digest food, the Virgin could not and would not.

Catherine's ascetic practices were considered radical, falling far outside the standard practice of her age, even for the most devout. Throughout her life she claimed to listen only to her inner conversation with God. Although she made concessions in order to disprove her critics' theories about her fasting, in the end Catherine returned to that which she felt was her path.

> [S]he acted in every manner as she said her spiritual bridegroom Jesus Christ told her she should, and not as earthly men might order or advise. That she ate almost nothing was widely known; such behavior was not only scandalous in itself but led some of her contemporaries to believe that she was possessed by the devil. Her abstemiousness went far beyond the austere or ritual fasting of even the most holy men and women of her day and often was in direct violation of the explicit directions of her confessors. Various of these men assigned to watch, control, and guide her in her path of holiness (and to protect the Church from a possible heretic in its midst) ordered her to eat. For a time she obeyed, but the presence of even a mouthful of food in her stomach caused her to vomit, and after a while she simply refused. (Bell 23)

The virgin was true to the ideology she preached: renounce earthly concerns and listen only to the Word of the Lord—walk with the Savior on road to the cross.

In January of 1380, now in Rome, while contemplating Christ's circumcision and his precious blood there shed, Catherine decided to increase her asceticism and drink no water. She still traveled the mile to St. Peter's each day to spend

hours in prayer. On February 26, the Saint lost the use of her legs, yet one biographer claims that she still managed to arrive at St. Peter's during Lent. On April 29, 1380, starved, dehydrated, and physically ravaged, Saint Catherine died. To the end she was faithful to her pledge to follow the crucified Christ in every way—she was thirty-three. Dying as she did at thirty-three years, one month and four days, it is notable that the Saint did not live longer than Jesus.

As though it were the conclusion of a macabre novel, the Virgin's death was a microcosm of the life that Catherine herself chose. For a woman who lived with her physical body as her mortal enemy, it is strangely appropriate that her final demise would be rife with physical pain and suffering. Edmund Gardner, one of Catherine's biographers, poetically describes the Virgin's final moments:

> Fearful visions of demons began to assail her, mingling with the celestial visitations of her Divine Spouse. Her bodily sufferings became unendurable. She cried to God to receive the sacrifice of her life in the mystical body of the Church. . . . [I]t seemed to her that the Navicella—the Ship of the Church—was laid on her shoulders, and that it crushed her to death. The few weeks of life that remained to her were one prolonged martyrdom, out of which we have her last letter . . . full of mystical exultation in her own sufferings, "*tanti dolci tormenti corporali* (so many sweet bodily torments)." (Gardner 65-66)

"Tanti dolci tormenti corporali" were the matrix from which the personal ethic of Catherine was born. The Saint had believed she could transcend the "earthly cell" through pain and suffering. Asceticism had finally yielded the Saint to death.

Catherine not only walked the path of the crucified Christ as she herself saw it, but she also espoused for others to do it. She preached to everyone from Popes, to the powerful Milanese Visconti tyrants, to novice monks. The integral facet of catherinian doctrine was the complete divorce of the individual from earthly concerns. For the Saint, the profane world was entirely incompatible with communing with the Divine. Her words are not ambiguous. In a letter[3] to a young Sienese monk, she wrote:

> My cherished son, we cannot achieve this perfect conformity with Christ without complete detachment from conformity with the world. The world is opposed to God and God to the world: they have nothing in common. This is indeed so: we see that the God-Man chose abject poverty, insults, torment, derision, and ridicule, hunger and thirst. He scorned human glory and honor and sought always the Father's glory and our salvation. . . . There was no pride in him, but rather perfect humility. (*Letters* 51)

The Saint's words: "the world is opposed to God and God to the world: they have

nothing in common." Her words to the young monk were not equivocal but her letter continues and Catherine makes herself even more explicit:

> Oh how deluded they are, these stupid people who are conformed with this evil world! Though they seek honors they are disgraced; in pursuit of riches they are poor, because they are not looking for genuine wealth; wanting happiness and pleasure they find sadness and bitterness, because they lose God, who is supreme happiness. They want neither bitterness nor death, but fall into both. They want firmness and stability, yet wander far from the living rock. So you see, dearest son, how great is the opposition between Christ and the world. (*Letters* 51)

In Catherine's vision, Christ is not neutral with respect to the world; it is not a passive relationship, but rather the terrestrial realm is an enemy of the Divine. This battle was seen as more fierce than any earthly one. Catherine wrote:

> There are many who have been victorious over a city or a fortress, but if they have failed to conquer themselves and their enemies—the world, the flesh, and the devil—one could say they have nothing at all. So up. . . . Choose to hold fast your lordship over the city of your soul. Fight fiercely against those three enemies. (*Letters* 68-69)

The Saint saw three evils assail the security of the soul : the world, the flesh, and the devil. Catherine encouraged "mortal combat against the physical world"[4] to fight those enemies.

Catherine cogently encouraged every individual to whom she wrote to shed the concerns of this life, to turn to God, and walk in the footsteps of the crucified Christ. Her language often phrases the benefits of religious experience in the terms of material rewards. The seemingly ubiquitous example of this rhetoric is the Word of God as the only nourishment that one needs. Maud Ellmann, in her book about the links between starving and ideology, writes about the origins of this conception and cites Saint Catherine as its chief proponent:

> The belief that words can take the place of food goes back as far as the Old Testament, specifically to the famous passage in Deuteronomy 8:3, where we are told that God humbled his people and suffered them to hunger so that they might know that "man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the LORD doth man live." "If you follow this truth," Saint Catherine wrote, "you will have the life of grace and never die of hunger, for the Word has himself become your food." (Ellmann 22)

Food is not the only material concern which Catherine used as a metaphor for the bounty of the grace of the Lord. She wrote to one of her closest disciples

that he must clothe himself with the crucified Christ. She pleaded:

> I beg you to fulfill my desire: conform yourself with Christ crucified. Elevate yourself completely above the world's traffic. . . . In no other way can we be conformed with Christ. Clothe, clothe yourself with Christ crucified. He is the wedding garment that will give you grace, and afterward will afford you a place with the truly joyful at the table of everlasting life. (*Letters* 53)

Not only will the love of Christ provide clothes, but it will provide the ultimate vestment, a wedding garment. Catherine geared her language to the individual to whom she was writing. In this case, she was writing to Neri di Landoccio Pagliaresi, a young Sienese nobleman and poet who was studying with monks in Asciano; by using the term wedding garment, the Saint touches at the heart of the life of Pagliaresi, who would soon be expected to return to Siena and marry.

This manner of individualizing religious metaphors appears in many of the Saint's letters. In a letter to Bernabò Visconti of Milan, the tyrant who ruled for twenty years and was excommunicated twice for his opposition to the papacy, Catherine put a relationship to God in terms which Visconti could have appreciated, not agreed with, but understood. She wrote:

> It seems to **me**, that no man ought to consider or call himself lord, but rather administrator. And this administration is not for always, but only for a time—as it pleases our gentle Lord. And if you should ask me, "Then don't we have any lordship at all on this earth?" I would answer, yes, we have the most satisfying, most gratifying, most mighty lordship there is—lordship over the city of our own soul. Oh, is there anything greater or more magnificent than to possess a city in which the all-good God dwells, where peace and tranquillity and all consolation are to be found! So strong is this city and such a perfect realm that neither the devil nor anyone else can seize it unless we ourselves consent. It is never lost except through deadly sin. . . . [W]e shall keep guard over our city and shall master ourselves and the whole world. . . . [W]e shall laugh off the world and all its pleasures, considering them corruptible and worse than dung. (*Letters* 68)

Catherine's diplomacy is striking; employing delicate yet trenchant words, she subtly chastised a tyrant and suggested that he substitute his vast kingdom for the lordship of his own soul. Despite the shrouded rhetoric, the sibilant voice is heard: only renouncing the sensual world and assiduously following the path of the crucified Christ will yield true wealth.

Her astute choice of words is also evident in Catherine's letter to the wife of Visconti, Regina Beatrice della Scala, a woman described by one historian as "the ambitious and able daughter of the despot of Verona. . . . [A woman who]

'ruled in great part her husband's dominion; she was of an imperious nature, proud, and daring, insatiable of wealth'" (Gardner 31). Catherine wrote to this queen:

> The soul who has fallen in love with God, she who is a servant and slave ransomed by the blood of God's Son, attains such great dignity that she cannot be called a servant now, but an empress, spouse of the eternal emperor! . . . To serve God is not to be a slave, but to reign! For God rescues her from the servitude of sin and makes her free. . . . There she is at peace, in perfect rest and quiet, for her desires are fulfilled. (*Letters* 75)

Catherine intimated that Regina della Scala would not be a real queen until she renounced profane concerns for sacred ones, becoming the empress of the eternal emperor. Catherine gently denounced the queen's lifestyle:

> I don't want you to be preoccupied with your exalted status, or with wealth and pleasure, or with any difficulties or trouble you see coming your way. Let neither pleasure nor pain hold you back . . . find your delight in virtue and in suffering for Christ crucified. . . . Use the things of this world as nature needs them, but not with excessive attachment. For it would be very displeasing to God if you were to set your heart on something of less value than yourself. That would be nothing but a surrender of your dignity. For people become like what they love. If I love sin, which is nothingness, I too become a nothing. I cannot fall any lower than that. (*Letters* 74-75)

The Saint begged Regina della Scala to shed her attachment to the earthly realm, to end her nefarious ways which Catherine believed left her outside of the grace of the Lord. From these words is gleaned another facet of Catherine's ideology, that without the Lord, a human has no real being. As she wrote above: "If I love sin, which is nothingness, I too become a nothing." The Saint adopted the common medieval conception that humans have no real being without God, therefore one must conform to the will of God. The Saint writes on how to attain being through God: "If we were to ask that . . . most merciful Father [how to discover the holy will], this is how he would answer us: 'Dearest children, if you wish to discover and experience the effects of my will, dwell within the cell of your soul.'" Catherine again:

> we can recognize our own poverty: we see that we are not. For we are not. We see that our being is from God. . . . In recognizing that we are nothing we humble ourselves. And in humbling ourselves we enter that flaming, consumed heart, opened up like a window without shutters, never to be closed.
>
> (*Letters* 44)

Catherine insisted that there was no being without God and that one could only draw closer to Him by looking inward and rejecting terrestrial concerns. Catherine was unequivocal with those who refused to relent. She wrote: " If you tell me about the great concern you must have over temporal things, [I answer that] things are only as temporal as we make them. . . . I want you to be conscientiously concerned with your attention directed as God would have it" (*Letters* 40). She advocated the path of the disciples who abjured all earthly comforts and looked to God alone for guidance:

> [We must act] the way the holy disciples acted. They took all spiritual and material comfort lightly. . . . [T]hey submitted to every burden and humiliation, and to death, for God's honor and their neighbor's salvation. So they were separated from each other. So they made light of consolation and embraced suffering. And this is the way I would have you act. (*Letters* 39-40)

Catherine preached for all to walk in the path of the crucified Christ. She admonished: "go the path of suffering, the path of disgrace, derision, torment, ridicule, and persecution. It is by such suffering that we become conformed with Christ crucified. He is the spotless lamb who scorned the world's wealth and power" (*Letters* 74). In Catherine's words, conformity with God is found only within the cell of one's soul. She wrote:

> This is why God's true servants, realizing that the world has nothing in common with Christ, try conscientiously to avoid any conformity with the world. They . . . become lovers of what God loves and haters of what he hates. They have no other wish than to be conformed with Christ crucified, ever following in his steps, ablaze with love for true virtue. . . . [I]t is good to follow him, to remove yourself and cut yourself off entirely from this dark life. . . . [P]ure love for God will sever you from it. (*Letters* 52)

For Saint Catherine, one could not attain the grace of God without becoming an exile from profane concerns; one must imprison oneself within the cell of one's mind, that intangible part of a human which she saw communing with the divine will. Catherine wrote to an abbess:

> I don't think it is possible to have virtue or the fullness of grace without dwelling within the cell of our heart and soul, where we will gain the treasure that is life for us . . . the holy abyss that is holy knowledge of ourselves and of God. . . . [T]his holy knowledge . . . makes us join ourselves with supreme eternal First Truth, because we recognize that we ourselves are the basest of lies, agents of that which has no being. This hatred will make us proclaim his goodness with a cry from the heart: "You alone are the one who is good. You are the peaceful sea from which come all things that have being." (*Letters* 38)

Hence, Catherine implored those to whom she wrote to choose what she believed to be the right path: to have real being derived from God, to scoff at earthly concerns, and to chain themselves to the Love of Jesus and the will of God. The Saint viewed the righteous choice not as relinquishing something, but as gaining everything. She often phrased the gifts of the divine love in terms of material reward. The exegesis of her letters provide an integral aspect of the Saint's ideology: those who concerned themselves with the world were not choosing profane life now in exchange for divine reward in the hereafter, as a layman might conjecture; rather, the Saint saw those individuals as choosing eternal death. Her disdainful words have just a shade of pity:

> [T]hat poor wretched soul—who mirrors the carnal pleasures in which he wallows like a pig in mud—changes from a person into an animal in that putrid avarice of his! . . . He becomes swollen with pride, and spends his whole life seeking honor. And what should be given to serve the poor he spends on banquets and a host of servants and well-fed horses. These are the deeds that are presented at the moment of death for judgment and justice. He thought he was acting against God, but in reality he was acting against himself. He has become his own judge, and has condemned himself, since he has made himself deserving of eternal death. (*Letters* 57)

Thus, the man who lived outside the grace of God and busied himself with worldly concerns became bestial, less than human. If being was derived only from God, humanity was as well; without God's grace and Jesus' love, man was nothing more than a swine rolling happily, but foolishly, in his own excrement. Catherine warned those in her flock to avoid this inauspicious demise. She wrote: "Let's not be naive: it is the height of stupidity to make oneself deserving of death when one could have life. It is up to us, then, to use the freedom we have been given to choose life or death" (*Letters* 57).

Catherine felt man had been given the chance to choose life or death, grace or sin, because Christ was crucified. One must not only try to emulate His path, but recognize that this life had been provided by the grace of the Incarnation. If one obsessed about temporal problems, one rejected the beautiful gift that Jesus had given them; one willingly bound oneself to the devil in sin when they should have been thankful that the blood of Christ had liberated them. Catherine wrote to her brothers: "I . . . beg you to put your hope decisively in God and not in this mortal life. I beg you, as ransomed servants, to set your desire and your souls' affection intently on your Savior who has ransomed you" (*Letters* 63). One discerns this same motif in a letter to a priest at Asciano whom Catherine felt was too involved in the political events of his parish. She admonished him:

> Don't make yourself unworthy of what God has made you worthy of—I mean the precious blood of his Son, by which you were ransomed with such blazing love. We are ransomed servants; we can no longer sell ourselves. But when we are in deadly sin we do blindly sell ourselves to the devil. I beg you, for the love of Christ crucified; let's get out of such slavery! (*Letters* 58)

The Saint pleaded with the priest to free himself from the slavery of profane concerns and focus on the divine will. The catherinian conception is neo-platonic; once one glimpses the essence of the crucified Christ—that he had nothing in this material world and gave up his life to cleanse us—one can take no other road but that of the spiritual journey. The profane world ceases to exist; it embodies nothingness; one wants only to commune with divine love. Catherine wrote:

> It is an awesome thing to see the good gentle Jesus, the one who rules and feeds the whole universe, in such want and need that no one else has ever been as poor as he. He is so poor that Mary hasn't a blanket to wrap him in. In the end he dies naked on the cross so that he might reclothe us and cover our nakedness. Our sin had left us naked; we had lost the garment of grace. So Jesus gave up his own life and with it clothed us. I tell you, then, the soul who has discovered love in the love of Christ crucified will be ashamed to pursue it in any other way than that of Christ crucified. She will not want pleasure, status, pomp, but will prefer to be like a pilgrim or traveler in this life, with her attention focused wholly on reaching her journey's goal.

Catherine believed everyone could be converted by the power of divine love. In a letter to an abbess, she explained:

> [I]f we have not . . . been set aflame by the fire of this holy desire . . . I beg you . . . let this stone be melted in the hot overflowing blood of God's Son, in that blood whose warmth is enough to melt the hardness and frigidity of any heart. . . . This is what the Holy Spirit does when he enters the soul. . . . [S]how your willingness to be pierced by this sword. (*Letters* 39)

This neo-platonic catherinian view of divine revelation is abundant in Catherine's letters. For the sienese Saint, once one had seen the God-Man on the cross and felt his love in being crucified for mankind, one could not help but be pierced by the sword of God and want to run and bury oneself in Jesus' wound. From that point on, one will have no regard for earthly matters; the only sustenance that will be desired will be the divine *Logos*. Catherine wrote:

> [N]o soul could look at God becoming a man, running to the shame of the holy cross, and shedding his blood so profusely, and not draw near, enter in, and be

> filled with true love. This is how we come to take delight in the food in which God delights. This is how we learn to enjoy eating . . . a food so sweet and mild that [it] makes us fat, till we can enjoy no other food. I tell you, here your weak teeth will be so strengthened that you will be able to eat big mouthfuls as well as small. (*Letters* 55)

The catherinian view envisions the crucified Christ as feeding all of humanity through its love and grace, simultaneously cleansing humanity in its blood and charity. The crucified Christ is the representation of the divine will accessible to the human striving toward God. Catherine wrote:

> I want to see us at the table of the spotless Lamb, who is food, table, and waiter. The fruits on this table are the true solid virtues. No other table bears fruit, but this one's fruit is perfect, because this table is lifegiving. This table has been furrowed, with channels everywhere flowing with blood. But among them all there is one channel flowing with blood and water mixed with fire, and to the eye that rests on this channel is revealed the secret of his heart. This blood is a wine on which our soul gets drunk. The more we drink, the more we would like to drink, and we are never fully satisfied, because his flesh and his blood are joined with the infinite God. (*Letters* 49-50)

The catherinian devotee drinks the blood of Christ in order to commune with the Divine. It is as if Catherine conceived of one literally drinking from Jesus' wound as he hangs on the cross, and in so doing, honoring God and saving oneself. She wrote:

> [T]he table on which we find this wine . . . [is] the pierced side of God's Son. This is the blood that warms, that drives out all chill, clears the voice of the one who drinks it, and gladdens heart and soul. . . . We have taken our example from the one who is continually pouring out his blood at this table—and not for his own good but for ours. We who eat at this table and become like the food we eat begin to do as he does—not for our own good but for God's honor and for our neighbor's salvation. (*Letters* 50)

Thus, through metaphorically drinking from the wound in humble supplication, the catherinian simultaneously honors the Divine and follows in the footsteps of the Son of God.

The idea of Christ feeding the world from his wound, that is, feeding the masses through the Word of the Lord, appears in other medieval writings and can in no way be attributed to Catherine alone. Caroline Walker Bynam, in her book *Jesus as Mother*, gives a cogent example of this leitmotif in the theological genre.

> The blood that flows from the wound in Christ's side becomes wine, the water

> becomes milk; and the soul not only draws nurture from Christ but also flees for refuge into the wound in the wall in his body. "Then one of the soldiers opened his side with a lance and there came forth blood and water. Hasten, linger not, eat the honeycomb with your honey, drink your wine with your milk. The blood is changed into wine to gladden you, the water into milk to nourish you. From the rock streams have flowed for you, wounds have been made in his limbs, holes in the wall of his body, in which, like a dove, you may hide while you kiss them one by one. Your lips, stained with blood, will become like a scarlet ribbon and your word sweet." (Bynam, *Jesus as Mother* 122-23)

In the catherinian conception, man who has been ransomed out of slavery to the devil by the crucified Christ, can now drink the blood from His wound, be illuminated by the Word of the Lord, and take refuge in the wound of the Incarnation. For Catherine, one must abhor and reject every modicum of sensual physical reality **except** the Divine incarnation; Jesus' flesh has provided the opportunity for redemption and burnt the path to eternal life. One follows not only in the footsteps of the crucified Christ, but drinks His blood, and thus becomes conformed with the divine will. The only manifestation of the sensual physical reality that has value is the body of Christ on the cross. The one worthy manifestation of physicality serves as the model to transcend the earthly realm and move on to eternal life; the crucified Christ has simultaneous provided for salvation and offered the model for attaining it.

In the final analysis, Catherine's ideology is paradoxical. She lived and preached the rejection of physicality and earthly concerns in every way, yet she believed that only the **body** of Christ offered the path to eternal life.[5] Furthermore, it is through the torments of her own physical self that Catherine found spiritual enlightenment. While eschewing all other corporeality, she advocated contemplation of the physical nature of the crucified Christ and conformity to that exemplum.

> Although Catherine abhorred her own flesh, condemning it as a "dung heap," she saw the fleshliness of Christ not as some sort of miraculous protection to save us from human vulnerability but as the "way" or "bridge" to lead us to salvation through suffering. She even said that the ring of flesh with which Christ marries us in the Circumcision is a sign that he is a spouse of our humanity. Thus, hateful as body may have been to Catherine, it was **body** that she saw as uniting us to the body of God. And it united us to God by suffering. (Bynam, *Holy Feast* 175)

The resin of catherinian ideology is revealed: follow the example of Jesus, break with the world, and you will sit with Him at the table of eternal life. The Incarnation is the rope which hangs down from the boundaries of Heaven

offering mankind redemption. In the catherinian theology, man must refuse all other corporeality and focus only on the suffering flesh of Christ. While all other physicality is the portal to sin, Christ's body is the key to salvation.

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Notes

[1]It should be noted that the events of Catherine's early life have been drawn primarily from the hagiography of Raymond of Capua, her mature confessor. Some critics have argued that this account is particularly specious. Catherine's mother was the source the early biographical information. It has been implied that Lapa embellished to no end, given that there was talk of canonization. Regardless, it all created part of the mythos of the saint whose the mature asceticism was as infamous as it was well-documented.

[2]A term coined by the title of Rudolph Bell's book.

[3]There are 382 extant letters of Saint Catherine of Siena. Although she did not learn to write until the last few years of her life (when she composed her *Dialogo*), it is believed that the letters are authentic. There is a consistent style which characterizes the letters although they were composed by various scribes.

[4]Paul Vangelisti, UCLA Italian Department, suggested this turn of phrase to me.

[5]Related to this, Caroline Walker Bynam, in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast,* has noted that Catherine placed the Incarnation, not the Resurrection, at the center of her theology.

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Dissimulation, Female Embodiment and the Nation: Renata Viganò's *L'Agnese va a morire*

In her 1949 novel, *L'Agnese va a morire*, Renata Viganò presents a female protagonist who works as a partisan "staffetta" (a courier) against the Fascists and Nazis who have killed her husband. After killing a German soldier, Agnese is compelled to take refuge with the partisans in the Padana Valley. As a large-sized, middle-aged widow, Agnese might initially seem an unlikely candidate for the partisan Resistance. It is by exploiting this tendency to read the surface of the body as a manifestation of interiority, however, that Agnese maneuvers through the ideological space that eventually characterized German and Italian Fascism, namely the classification of certain bodies as abject.[1]

Abjection, for Julia Kristeva, is an aversion to the corporeality that has historically been associated with the female, maternal body and the struggle to separate from it. As feminist and postmodern critiques of the Enlightenment tradition have argued, rather than constituting itself, the body is constituted by delimiting relations to itself and to other bodies, including political bodies. As Sidonie Smith observes, the ". . . politics of the body as border/limit determines the complex relationship of individuals to their bodies, to the bodies of others, to fantasies of the founding subject, and to the body politic" (10). That complex relationship also engenders what is perceived as the body. Because the fantasy of Enlightenment's Cartesian male has been transcendence—that is, disembodiment, women become the embodied subjects, and, subsequently, subject to their embodiment.

For Agnese, it is her embodied identity as a large, older peasant which establishes her marginal position in the body politic, in this case, that resilient plebeian spirit of the nation.[2] In particular, the manner in which that embodiment is read by others allows Agnese to dissimulate her "real" relation to the body politic, camouflaging herself and her clandestine activities from the German occupiers. As Jean Baudrillard clarifies, "To dissimulate is to feign to not have what one has. . . . Thus, feigning or dissimulating leaves the reality principle intact: the difference is always clear, it is only masked" (5). What is masked by

Agnese's dissimulation is her real relation to the body politic: her identity as a partisan.

However, Agnese's relation to the body politic is more complex than the simple masking of one reality with another. On one level, her relation to the body politic is tautological. In as much as Agnese can be understood to be the body politic incarnate, any relation of hers to that body is redundant. On another level, Agnese's relation to the body politic is not redundant but precarious, for "the cause," i.e., the Resistance, demands the abrogation of the self. Through Agnese's requisite, patriotic self-sacrifice in service to the Resistance, the self is elided. For although Agnese is physically distinct from the other partisans, her allegiance to the cause will ideally render her indecipherable from the other partisans.

For Antonio Gramsci, this elision of the self is necessary in times of war and revolution.[3] Indeed Viganò has Agnese espouse just such an "ethics of sacrifice."[4] However, for Agnese this self-abnegation coincides with an abject reading of femininity. As such, any reciprocity which might exist between Agnese and the body politic is askew in favor of the latter. Moreover, Agnese's proclivity to dissimulate will be manipulated by the Resistance which will exploit that dissimulation to its own ends.

Agnese's identity is, in a sense, indecipherable even before she joins the Resistance. Working as a washerwoman, Agnese dissimulates her identity by already seeming to be what she was not: "Verso la sera l'Agnese raccoglieva il bucato già secco . . . [e poi] andava verso la casa; . . . Passavano i ragazzi che scendevano alla pesca in valle: le dicevano ridendo: – Buonanotte, carro armato!" (Viganò 23). That Agnese's physical embodiment evokes militant images harkens to more than the pervasiveness of war in the consciousness of even Italian children. The children's comment, which is clearly meant to tease Agnese, is nevertheless apt. Working as a courier for the Resistance and as a peasant washerwoman, Agnese indeed has a dual identity. Furthermore, the analogy of domestic service to warfare foreshadows the domestic, maternal assistance she will offer the partisans, to the extent that she denies herself food and sleep for their sake.

The comparison of Agnese to a tank also intimates that Agnese will become a "fighting machine" in a more traditional, masculine sense. Yet, Agnese's transformation from humble peasant to partisan is not so disjunctive as it may seem. As the description of the killing of the German soldier suggests, Agnese's skills as peasant washerwoman, and her identity as a woman, bereaved of her husband, translate into an ability to kill:

> Kurt, il soldato grasso, si era addormentato con la testa appoggiata al braccio. . . . Allora [l'Agnese] prese fortemente il mitra per la canna, lo sollevò, lo calò di colpo sulla testa di Kurt, come quando sbatteva sull'asse del lavatoio i pesanti lenzuoli matrimoniali, carichi d'acqua. (Viganò 54)

Agnese's strength as a washerwoman and her ability to kill are then intricately connected. Because Agnese is representative of the body politic in general, her actions are illustrative of the fact that the passage from peaceful peasantry to guerrilla resistance is not so far. In still another way the children's teasing is suggestive. Similar to a tank, Agnese succeeds in moving through the German occupiers. As such, this reference to Agnese's embodiment augurs both her ability to combat and her ability to dissimulate her relation to the body politic.

Owing to her physical and gendered characteristics, Agnese is not immediately perceived, nor does she perceive herself, as more than marginally positioned with regard to the war and its politics. As she explains to the partisans who first approach her about the Resistance, "Mio marito ne parlava, ma erano cose di politica e di partito, cose da uomini. Io non ci badavo" (Viganò 21). And even when Agnese begins working with the Resistance after her invalid husband Palita is deported and dies in a German transport, her embodiment continues to seemingly position her on the borders of the body politic. By dissimulating her partisan activities, Agnese is able to be a part of the partisan Resistance while remaining under the noses of the Germans who have occupied la Minghina's house, the neighbor who, along with her husband and two daughters, collaborated with the Germans and caused Palita's deportation and death.

Through her dissimulation, which manipulates the Germans' own prejudice against certain types of embodiment, Agnese hoodwinks the Germans at their own game. Not wanting the Germans to occupy her house, Agnese uses the space of her body to dissuade them:

> Un maresciallo venne dritto alla porta, guardò dentro. L'Agnese non si mosse, stava seduta con le gambe larghe e la gatta in grembo. Così grossa, sembrava prendere tutto il posto nella cucina, che non ci fosse più spazio per un passo. Il tedesco guardò un poco, poi disse: – Qui niente bono, – e voltò le spalle. (Viganò 51)

And when the Germans move into la Minghina's house next door: "I tedeschi non le badavano: agitavano le mani all'altezza della fronte e dicevano: – Matta. Vecchia brutta e matta, – e le ragazze [di Minghina] ridevano" (Viganò 52). Whereas before Agnese "non badava alla politica," the Germans now fail to pay attention to the politics of Agnese. As a result, the Germans are handicapped by

their reductive and abject reading of Agnese which clearly converges on the surface of her body.

In allowing herself to be read as merely "vecchia brutta e matta," and therefore innocuous, Agnese dissimulates her real intentions. Her ability to do so far exceeds the capabilities of the male partisans: "il suo aspetto duro e pacifico non attirava i tedeschi, non si interessavano di una vecchia grossa contadina, e lei passava tranquillamente in mezzo a loro, avevano sotto il naso quella sporta e non pensavano di guardarci dentro" (Viganò 231). Her ability to dissimulate is due in part to the stereotypical assumptions made on the basis of her embodiment and her demeanor. But, as we will see, Agnese's ability to dissimulate also gestures to the desire by both the Germans and the partisans (and Viganò herself) to read Agnese's embodiment and actions allegorically.

Agnese is herself well aware that she is considered, at the very least, a large-sized woman. The narrator returns repeatedly not only to describe how Agnese's body is perceived by others but to how she experiences it herself. When Agnese first joins the partisans after having killed the German soldier Kurt, she recalls a time when she and her husband Palita went to the city to visit a famous doctor. Agnese recalls that "si vergonava di muoversi in mezzo alla gente" (Viganò 63). On that occasion, even the doctor misreads Agnese's embodiment by mistaking her for Palita's mother rather than his wife:

> – Suo figlio ha avuto una grave malattia, signora. Se l'è cavata bene. Con un po' di riguardo può vivere fino a novant'anni. Moriremo prima di lui, signora –. Come rideva, Palita, per lei che era diventata rossa! Tutti e tre avevano riso per l'equivoco, e il dottore s'era scusato. Un dottore così bravo certo non si sbagliava. Palita doveva vivere fino a novant'anni, se non ci fossero stati i tedeschi. (Viganò 63-64)

The doctor's misunderstanding is telling; he not only misreads Agnese's identity and her relationship to Palita, but he fails to foresee the advent of the war and therefore misdiagnoses not only Palita's fates but Italy's fate as well. While the doctor's misreading of Agnese's embodiment surely foreshadows a similar misreading by the Germans, the misreading of Agnese's body is also linked to a misreading of the nation's body, alluding to how the one body will come to signify the other.

Repeated reference to Agnese's large size, her wide face, her massive hands, her muscular thighs, her heavy, strained heart together form a motif of embodiment. However, throughout the text, particular emphasis is given to Agnese's hands. After becoming a courier for the partisans, she is asked by one of them,

> – Chi credete che abbia dato ai fascisti il nome di vostro marito? – e intanto con il pollice segnò verso la parete in direzione della casa della Minghina. – Sì, – rispose l'Agnese. – L'ho pensato subito. Se ne fossi sicura . . . – Strinse con violenza le sue grandi mani sciupate contro l'orlo della tavola. Un bicchiere pieno si rovesciò. – Allegria! – dissero i compagni, guardando colare il vino. – State tranquilla, lo sapremo. Chi è stato, lo « facciamo fuori » –. E il più giovane accenno l'atto di tirare il collo a una gallina. L'Agnese capì, non le parole, ma il gesto: e questa volta sorrise, improvvisamente, con serenità.
>
> (Viganò 22)

That Agnese understands not the words but the gesture indicates both her affinity with the partisans, and her difference from them. While it is unclear whether Agnese does not understand the expression "fare fuori" and is therefore linguistically alienated from the partisans, she clearly understands their gesture or action. Its semiotic significance easily translates from a peasant vernacular to a military one, stressing again the affinity between these two groups.

It is not insignificant that "azione" is the Italian word that indicates a partisan military operation. Agnese's own action in this passage: "Strinse con violenza le sue grandi mani" and the partisans' proclamation, "Chi è stato, lo 'facciamo fuori,'" are together both profetic and transformative. Ultimately those "grandi mani" kill the German soldier Kurt. Agnese thus indirectly enacts the partisans threat to "fare fuori" the informants for, in reprisal to Kurt's death, the Germans kill la Minghina and her family. As a result, Agnese's "grandi mani" achieve their vendetta to avenge the death of Palita and in the process they transform her into a partisan.

Agnese's hands are again the narrator's focus when they capture the attention of the partisan company she has joined:

> Il partigiano del paradello si piegò in avanti, remando. Disse: – Ma come hai fatto, compagna? Gli hai sparato? – L'Agnese afferrò per la canna il mitra che Clinto teneva fra le ginocchia, lo sollevò, rispose: – Io non so sparare. Gli ho dato un colpo così –. Fece l'atto, poi rimise piano piano il mitra sul sedile. La sua vecchia faccia era immobile, contro il chiaro dell'alba. Tutti, nella barca, guardavano quelle grandi mani distese. (Viganò 58-59)

This passage also illustrates both Agnese's difference from and similarity to the partisans. Part of that difference is due to the physical strength and ferocity that reside behind the guise of a "vecchia grossa contadina." While Agnese's embodiment dissimulates her identity, it also, as in the case of her hands, offers a clue to her potential as a partisan soldier.

If we compare the description of Agnese's hands, repetitively described as "grosse" and "grandi," to the one mention of the partisan leader's hands—the hands of the Comandante, his appear much more fragile and delicate than Agnese's. When a group of partisans become trapped in their barrack by the frozen marsh waters, the Comandante and a few partisans add a metal prow to a boat in order to break the ice and bring supplies to the barrack:

> Era un lavoro pesante: col freddo e i colpi le mani sanguinavano, quelle del Comandante più degli altri, non erano abituate al ferro, al martello. Aveva la pelle sottile, si screpolava, si tagliava: su quelle mani appena un po' scure per il sole, ma lisce, il sangue si vedeva più rosso. (Viganò 182)

As a lawyer from the city, it is not surprising that his hands are so delicate; his hands, like his body, are clearly unlike Agnese's, unaccustomed to heavy, manual labor. And though the Comandante and the partisans suffer physical pain and deprivation, though they persevere under dire conditions, it is significant that the text displaces the bulk of embodiment onto Agnese; she becomes the repository of embodiment for the Resistance movement as a whole.

As Judith Butler contends regarding the Enlightenment tradition, masculine disembodiment is possible only through the compulsory embodiment of women:

> By defining women as "Other," men are able through the shortcut of definition to dispose of their bodies,—a symbol potentially of human decay and transience, of limitation generally. . . . From this belief that the body is Other, it is not a far leap to the conclusion that others **are** their bodies, while the masculine "I" is the noncorporeal soul. The body rendered as Other—the body repressed or denied and, then, projected—reemerges for this "I" as the view of others as essentially body. Hence, women become the Other, they come to embody corporeality itself. This redundancy becomes their essence. (133)[5]

Viganò's text is nothing if not redundant regarding embodiment as Agnese's defining characteristic. Although Agnese manipulates her embodiment and exploits other's reading/misreading of it, she is inarguably textualized as more full-bodied than the others.

Viganò's portrayal of Agnese's involvement in the partisan Resistance parallels the development of the involvement of partisan women in the Italian Resistance beginning in the fall of 1943. According to Victoria de Grazia,

> 70,000 women were in the Women's Defense Groups and 35,000 were troops in the field. In addition, thousands of other women hid and cared for Resistance

> fighters and disbanded foreign soldiers, assisted Jews on the run from Nazi-fascist police, and protested Italian men from being conscripted for forced labor service. Forty-six hundred women were arrested, tortured, and tried, 2,750 were deported to German concentration camps, and 623 were executed or killed in battle. (274)

Renato Giancola, the author of *La donna italiana dalla resistenza ad oggi*, also estimates that at least 35,000 participated in the Resistance and that the cooperation of these women began with aid to the disbanded, to ally prisoners and to partisan soldiers. However, it is symptomatic of the cultural prejudice that casts women militants in the role of maternal or uxorial care-givers that this publication by the President of the Council of Ministers falls prey to a similarly gendered rhetoric. Stating that women partisans began by offering "aid, recovery, and support" to the male militia, Giancola then adds "le madri italiane vedevano il proprio figlio in balia della tempesta scatenata dalla guerra" (12). The slippage from a discussion of women partisans to the figure of the Italian mother erroneously assumes that all women partisans were mothers. In contrast to this presupposition, it is implied that Agnese is not a mother (Viganò 166). Nevertheless she is repeatedly referred to as "mamma Agnese" by both the partisans and the Germans, and, of course, the famous doctor who misdiagnosed Palita.

As such, embodiment cuts both ways for Agnese. On the one hand, the predisposition to read a person's embodiment in order to limit her identity or potential identity to her most ostensible physical characteristics is what enables Agnese to dissimulate and thus aid in the Resistance. On the other, the gender ideology which transmutes "woman" into "mother" is the same that early, twentieth-century German and Italian nationalism foisted onto women. Embodiment thus empowers Agnese and disempowers her by imposing on her a constricted identity.[6] The slippage by which all women become mothers—that quintessential example of embodiment—conceals a masculine prejudice against the femininity which embodiment signifies. Therefore, my intention here is not to champion the dissimulation of the female body and thereby risk the uncritical celebration of the displacement of women. Rather, Agnese exemplifies how dissimulation and compulsory female embodiment in a society and in an intellectual tradition that cherish disembodiment connote an ambivalence toward femininity.

Viganò's own text hints at a certain contempt of femininity, or certain characterizations of femininity such as that of la Minghina, and her two daughter, whose fates are sealed by their collaboration with the German occupiers. As the partisan Clinto details, "[I tedeschi] li hanno ammazzati a

baionettate: erano come delle bestie. A una delle ragazze piantarono la baionetta nella gola, e poi giù, fino in fondo alla pancia," (Viganò 75).[7] Here the collaboration of Italian nationals with the Germans is displaced onto these women, and onto a symbolic feminine whoring, willing to exchange one's body, and one's neighbors for safety.[8]

Other examples of Viganò's own ambivalence toward femininity include the casting of the Germans in the role of perverse femininity. For example, in characterizing the Germans' excited states as feminine and hysterical—a symptom which has historically been identified with femininity, and by having a virile female as her protagonist, Viganò displays, if not an intolerance, at least an ambivalence toward certain supposed manifestation of femininity. The femininity that Viganò embraces as being redemptive for the nation and its future is not unlike the femininity propagated by Fascism, a femininity in service of the state. Indeed Agnese only sanctifies herself and her womanhood through complete selflessness, thereby distancing herself from what is perceived as abject femininity.[9]

Yet, paradoxically, as she abrogates her femininity and its embodiment for the sake of the Resistance, Agnese and her embodiment also personify the partisan Resistance, that portion of the body politic which dissimulates its identity and presence in the face of the oppressor in order to subvert it. As such, the body politic is allegorized as an androgynous female, one who combines traditional and non-traditional feminine characteristics. For on the one hand, Agnese is childless, fearless, mentally and physically strong and hard—in short, virile; on the other, she is matronly, heavy-set, and she cries and mourns—although less than other women and less than some of the men. She is then ambiguously gendered for she denotes fecundity and virility, femininity without lack. In this sense, Agnese is the phallic woman, who by being both feminine and phallic, i.e., culturally empowered, allows for the synthesized of divergent components. By integrating woman's proclivity to embodiment with a prejudicial cultural tendency to configure political resistance as masculine or phallic, Agnese, as the phallic woman, can figure as the ideal concrete embodiment of the abstract or disembodied body politic.

Agnese's identity as both the body politic incarnate and abject female embodiment makes her presence a particularly disruptive one for that presence is duplicitous. Here, Judith Butler's observation that the body presents "a region of **cultural** unruliness and disorder" (131) is extremely trenchant. For Agnese, only in death will her "unruly and disorderly" embodiment finally be contained. This occurs when Agnese is eventually recognized as the murderer of Kurt by a German official:

> Il maresciallo gridò ancora: prese la pistola, le sparò da vicino negli occhi, sulla bocca, sulla fronte, uno, due, quattro colpi. . . . L'Agnese restò sola, stranamente piccola, un mucchio di stracci neri sulla neve. (Viganò 239)

Butler's aphorism regarding the body's unruliness proves doubly true for the capacious body of an Italian peasant woman who, in the midst of a war to control the resistant body of the Italy peninsula, comes to symbolize that body.

In a sense, Butler's assertion and Agnese's fate also provide an legend to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's following claim regarding women's difficult relation to nationalism:

> Women can be ventriloquists, but they have an immense **historical** potential of **not** being (allowed to remain) nationalists; of knowing, in their gendering, that nation and identity are commodities in the strictest sense: something made for exchange. And that they are the medium of that exchange. (803)

Viganò illustrates the excision of the feminine from national arena both with the novel's very title and denouement: *Agnese va a morire*, and through Agnese's mutation into a generic symbol of the Resistance and the nation.

In addition to its literary merit, *Agnese va a morire* is also important as an example of neorealist Resistance literature written by a woman about Italian women in the Resistance.[10] Not only did Viganò participate in the Resistance as the director of health services for the Communist guerrilla units in the area around Ravenna (Traldi 288), she chronicled the contribution of other women in *Donne della resistenza*. However, while Viganò's work can be said to document women's contribution to the Resistance, her texts also participate in the mythologizing of the Italian Resistance.

Italian neorealism itself contributed to this mythologization. Although it is usually associated with anti-Fascist literature and cinema, some of neorealism's earliest examples in Italy were not anti-Fascist but sympathetic to Fascism.[11] Similar to Fascism itself, neorealism then drew from both the left and the right of the political spectrum. As such, its putatively objective critique was useful to both political persuasions. On the one hand, neorealism was embraced by writers sympathetic to Fascism who saw neorealism as anti-rhetorical and activist, which seemed to parallel Fascism's critique of the political and social climate in the 1930's (Ben-Ghiat 157). On the other, neorealism's status as a critical literary style also appealed to those wishing to critique Fascism itself. Yet, as Ruth Ben-Ghiat points out, in the period immediately following World War II, there was a need to purged neorealism of its Fascist past and to claim its origins in "the anti-Fascist revolution" (Ben-Ghiat 158-59). One effect of this national

disavowal was that it permitted neorealism and post-war Italy to reiterate, wittingly or unwittingly, the rhetorical and political tropes of Fascism.[12]

Both Fascism and anti-Fascism share a stake in Italy's national identity. Viganò's text illustrates how that investment in national identity depends on certain abject and manipulative readings of the female body, which either suppress the feminine, masculinize it or often project it as an ideal national identity. For all its worthy qualities as a women's history, Viganò's text obfuscates, even as it demonstrates, the gender inequity that permeates the battleground.

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Notes

[1]See Victoria de Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy 1922-1945*, on Italian Fascism's attitudes, policies and rhetoric regarding gender. Also George Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality*, Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*; and Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. As Mosse and Young point out, "The idea of the unified nation . . . depended precisely on opposing manly virtue to the heterogeneity and uncertainty of the body, associating despised groups with the body, setting them outside the homogeneity of the nation" (Young 111). While Germany's National Socialism carried to greater extremes the classification and abjection of certain body types, Italian Fascism's misogynist public policies together with its nationalist impulses implicate it as well.

[2]Lucia Re makes a similar observation in *Calvino and the Age of Neorealism* 116-117.

[3]See Lucia Re on Gramsci's "ethics of sacrifice" (349).

[4]This is the case throughout the text but in particular see Agnese's explicit pronouncement on personal sacrifice in the context of the larger cause of the Resistance (Viganò 228-29).

[5]Quoted in Smith 11.

[6]As Judith Butler points out: "Discourses of embodiment [which include the valorization of motherhood, and its glorification as a patriotic duty] also mark woman as an encumbered self, identified almost entirely by the social roles concomitant with her biological destiny. Affiliated physically, socially, psychologically in relationship to others, her individuality [is] sacrificed to the 'constitutive definitions' of her identity a member of a family, as someone's daughter, someone's wife and some's mother" (Introduction to *Feminism as Critique*, quoted in Smith 12-13).

[7]While Augusto, la Minghina's husband, is killed along with his wife and daughters, he is portrayed as an inept male, conditioned by his wife and daughter. Furthermore, the four of them are referred to as "delle sgualdrine e delle spie" (Viganò 75), a characterization

that, by the use of feminine nouns, reinforces the association of Minghina, the two daughters and Augusto with femininity.

[8]Re notes that the portrayal of sexually promiscuous women as collaborators is a topos of neorealist Resistance literature (118).

[9]"Framed through embodiment, the 'proper' woman remains subject to man's authority and theorizing because, if unmanned and misaligned, she will subvert the body politic. To the extent that woman represses the body, erasing her sexual desire and individual identity while embracing encumbering identities in service to family, community, and country, she positions herself as proper lady who surmounts her negative identification with the body through selflessness" (Smith 16).

[10]Alberto Traldi, *Fascism and Fiction: A Survey of Italian Fascism on Fascism and its reception in Britain and the United States* 288-90. Also see Silvia Spellanzon, "Renata Viganò Poeta popolare" 794-99.

[11]See Ruth Ben-Ghiat, "Neorealism in Italy, 1930-50: From Fascism to Resistance" 155-129. Lucia Re's discussion of the question of neorealism's roots in the German Neo-objectivism (*Neue Sachichkeit*) is also helpful (16-18). Finally, Marcia Landy, *Fascism in Film: The Italian Commercial Cinema, 1931-1943*, makes an analogous argument regarding Italian neorealist film (4).

[12]Lucia Re gives an example of this citation of Fascism in neorealist texts in her reading of Aldo Vergano's 1946 film, *Il sole sorge ancora* (118-19).

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Pirandello's Wheelbarrow: A Revenge on Imagology

Carlo Michelstaedter was already considered one of the brightest minds of his generation by the time he was twenty three. This was also the year he completed his *tesi di laurea*, and after having submitted it, returned home and took his own life. Ten years earlier Nietzsche died.

> The one and only time Pirandello mentioned Michelstaedter—as Daniela Bini points out—was in an interview for *Quadrivio* only a month before his own death; he referred to him as an example of those unhappy thinkers who 'wanted to make form and substance coincide absolutely and in every instance and were overwhelmed.' With this statement Pirandello recognized an affinity on a basic philosophical point: the contradictoriness of life whose essence is flux but that must be fixed if it is somehow to be grasped. It must give itself a form. This form, however, is death; it stops the life that it tries to define. Pirandello shares this belief with Michelstaedter, but considers the pursuit of such coincidence (of 'form and substance') totally inane, insofar as it has only two possible conclusions: suicide, as in the case of Michelstaedter . . . or madness, as in the case of Nietzsche. (Bini 62)

When a reader first comes across Pirandello's notion of the "sentimento del contrario" explicated in *L'Umorismo*, one has to be willing to enter into a dialectic in which the criteria for objective reality is surrendered. Each and every time a situation appears to have been clarified a new series of reasonings emerge which contradict the very clarification previously attained. This "feeling of contradiction" represents the vulnerability which ubiquitously manifests itself within the image/images we hold of ourselves and of others, as well as the image/images others have of our own person and of themselves. This apparent theory of relativity in which a person's mind becomes the measure of all things is not however the point of arrival for Pirandello's extravagant brainstorming. Nor is Pirandello the pessimist we have heard about and read about for almost a century.

Pirandello goes well beyond a mere recipe for relativity as he also goes well beyond surrendering to issues of identity and truth. He has told us that the truth

is concealed, hidden, it eludes us by means of a brief glimpse allowed upon it, perhaps it even energizes a certain flirtation with death, it alters itself without any regard for the temporal or the spatial, and then again, it becomes concealed. Pirandello's truth is not one which finds tranquility in the prescriptions of the medical sciences, nor is it an issue to be resolved in the laborious attempts of uncovering the various layers which make up its constitution. The individuals which fill his pages cannot be cured by prying nor can they be assisted by being forced to confront their illness. Their world and the truth inhabiting it must be left alone, unrevealed and unsolved.

What does one do, however, in a world where this is not the case, in a world where we are forced to confront not only our perception of our being but the very perceptions others have created of our being. What are we to do the very first time we realize the incongruencies constituting our person? How is it posssible that all these images of our being all belong to one person bearing one name received at birth? These are the questions for which Pirandello lifted his pen.

Precisely what does Pirandello's pen tell us? This: that the lack of coherence between the various images thrust upon a person does not necessarily yield infertility or the need to abandon oneself. On the contrary, implies Pirandello, it is the mulitiplicity of images interacting with one another that allow for rich fertility. Pirandello gives life to the very process which allows us to identify the fragmentation of our feelings, therefore ourselves, and then provokes us into a creative frame of mind in which a static world can potentially be transformed into one of multi-faceted possibilities.

How does this process begin for Pirandello? The direction he takes in the exploration of what constitutes truth (even if an objective one has been surrendered), and more importantly the role of man's consciousness regarding the images of truth, appears to privilege the circumstances at hand. What is truth? How do individuals perceive truth? Will confrontations, rules, documents provide truth? These are the questions which capture our attention. Alone, however, such questions cannot be held responsible for retaining and promoting one's inquisitiveness. Methodology must always and already accompany the development of the investigation.

In tradition with modern thinkers beginning with Kant, Pirandello diligently displays the view that life is in a constant state of flux and that man's attempts to somehow bring this flux to a halt separate him from the natural course of life. To insist on the construction of a definitive form, of a single clarification, would be the equivalent of denying the range of possiblities with which Pirandello's narrative grabs our attention. This, however, is exactly what happens to most of us. Our identity is constructed by a series of compromises between our perception of the self and the perception others have of our being. Once we find

a role for ourselves which appears to function within our surroundings we embrace it and in time this construct solidifies. The crisis arises when we are faced with the arbitrariness and randomness with which this construct was formed.

The acknowledgement of the possibility of a self-nothingness mastered by autonomous image productions (the random compromises constituting our being) is brought to light in the short story "La carriola," in which a lawyer suddenly becomes aware that his family, his occupation and even his own name have become foreign. The lawyer realizes that for himself he has not been, he has been only for others.

> Io vedo non ciò che di me è morto; vedo che non sono mai stato vivo, vedo la forma che gli altri, non io, mi hanno data, e sento che in questa forma la mia vita, una mia vera vita, non c'è mai stata. (*Novelle* 312)

The lawyer also knows, however, that he cannot reverse the images which have been projected upon him and which have all along guided the events of his life. The abyss which separates the externally projected images thrust upon him on behalf of his family and profession and the images which he would like to hold for himself create a vacuum in which the feeling of contradiction is self-evident. It is out of this abyss that the lawyer finds a way to counter-attack the fate which he no longer controls and perhaps never did. Everyday, in total privacy, the lawyer takes the hind legs of the family's dog into his hands and walks around the desk in his office. In this non-sensical act, the protagonist is able, for a few brief moments everyday, to break away from the images which have thus dictated his life.

Adriano Tilgher writes:

> But in man, no matter how uncouth, life splits in two: even to the most uncouth of men it is essential to be and to know that he is , to live and to know that he lives. In man, life has projected and detached from itself as its own opposite something that Pirandello calls the feeling of life and that I would call, in philosophically stricter terms, consciousness, reflection, thought. In such detachment, with the attendant delusion of assuming as objectively and externally existing reality this mutable inner feeling of life, there lies the first cause of human misery. For once it has detached itself from life, the feeling of life (or consciousness as we may call it) by filtering through the brain tends to cool off, to clarify and idealize itself; from the particular, changeable, ephemeral state it was, it will eventually crystallize into a general, abstract idea (see Pirandello's essay "L'Umorismo" [in the book of the same name], second edition, pp. 168ff.). (Tilgher 21)

These ideas which individuals crystallize will form the barriers from which they will observe and understand life's images. From these images individuals then proceed to construct truth. Precisely from the probability that there lacks an awareness of one's own fictions and images, Pirandello turns to the written word in order to develop the unrealities of characters, thus individuals. Again, we must caution ourselves from categorical relativity and we are encouraged to enter into the domain of image-production. "Pirandello had long asserted the necessity of fictions in the process of self-creation," states Caputi, "but he had not previously pondered so intently the implications of living with fictions created with a full awareness that they are fictions."[1]

Pirandello's methodology relies on progressive development precisely because its own scaffolding agrees with the temporal flux. As conditions change so does the image-production. Pirandello's text constructs the dialectic between time and image and simultaneously is at its service. The scaffolding, comprised of characters and their language games, survives for its own subjectivism. The lawyer is aware of his fictitious being and he goes on to revenge himself against those fictions. Thomas Harrison states it diligently:

> The real obstruction to life occurs not when consciousness recognizes the distance between itself and the images by which it lives, but when these images reveal themselves to be no longer its own, when they take on a logic all their own, becoming autonomous and neglecting the volition of the character they ostensibly served. (Harrison 194)

Pirandello has no interest in creating a hierarchy in which one image validates itself more than another. What is significant is the very notion that we are so intimately involved with the totality of image-production. Pirandello fuels the process in which image A is contradicted by image B resulting in a third possiblity, image C. Just as we are part of the world around other individuals, the process calls for a coming to terms with others' perceptions of the world.

Pirandello's text provokes a process of self-realization which already possesses the ubiquitous discrepancies existing within our self-perceived image and the images of ourselves projected upon us by others. Pirandello captures each and every one of our image-productions through a character who remains passive until the final scene; when he does act he does so in his office, almost alone, confirming his own alienation.

One, willingly or not, breathes life into the possibilities of ten separate images when he or she walks into a room in which there are nine other people, the tenth image being the one each of us holds for ourselves. The concern of our protagonist relates solely to the dog and the image it holds of the master is

essentially inconsequential. Vitangelo Moscarda of *Uno, nessuno e centomila*, published in 1926, suffers from the same ailment as our lawyer, but Moscarda seeks revenge actively and socially while our silent honorable citizen does so in the privacy of his office.

> Il titolo del romanzo illustra la filosofia dell'autore: l'uomo è **uno**, cioè quello che egli crede di essere, e **nessuno**, perché non riesce ad adattarsi alla forma che gli altri gli danno o che cerca di darsi lui stesso. **Centomila** sono le diverse forme che le diverse persone gli danno. Dunque questo è un romanzo sulla « forma », e contiene teorie presenti in molte opere teatrali. Moscarda vuole mostrare di non essere ciò che gli altri ritengono che sia, e la sua rivolta contro il mondo, da lui operata per provare che l'opinione altrui era sbagliata, lo porta a scoprire sé stesso. (Valentini 132)

Moscarda searches for the one image underlying the thousands of images resulting in yet another manifestation of nothingness. The lawyer searches for an image which negates the presence of the thousands of images surrounding him. This in turn allows him to manifest a certain something which has meaning for his being and only his being. Moscarda is unable to achieve even that.

> Per sé, Vitangelo Moscarda è nessuno. L'io è infatti essenzialmente un essere-per-l'altro. Ma, per realizzarsi, questa coscienza nella quale si afferma la singolarità deve essere consapevole in tutti; questo senso dell'alterità, questo sentimento della finitudine di ciascuno, del limite individuale e del rapporto vicendevole, in cui si effettua il rispetto del singolo, e quindi la sua valorizzazione, deve essere pienamente consapevole. Invece tra gli uomini avviene esattamente il contrario. E questo è il dramma dell'essere in cui l'identità dell'io finisce con l'affogare.[2]

Both characters are conscious of their own multiple image production. The possibility of the lawyer being a "someone" which will confirm one image (identity) over another is always presumed and already surrendered. The possibility of Moscarda discovering a "self" which is not reducible to that which others see yields the *nessuno*, the nothingness of it all. Valentini writes regarding Pirandello's characters:

> I suoi personaggi sono sempre influenzati da ciò che egli chiama il « sentimento del contrario ». Ogni qualvolta sembrano esserci sufficienti ragioni per credere qualcosa, sorgono ragioni egualmente buone per credere la cosa opposta.
> (Valentini 11; cf. *L'Umorismo*)

Pirandello's characters lead the spectator into an abyss filled with un-realities of perceived images and possiblities of not yet perceived image-productions. Once

the exploration has begun does it become plausible to search even further, for the possibility of symmetries and asymmetries constituting our relation to that which surrounds us. However, it is often the opposite effect which takes place. We prefer to pursue some fixed notion of our being resulting in a denial of the many selves which even the mirror reveals through its limited powers of reflection. Milan Kundera phrases the problematic in the following way:

> A person is nothing but his image. Philosophers can tell us that it doesn't matter what the world thinks of us, that nothing matters but what we really are. But philosophers don't understand anything. As long as we live with other people, we are only what other people consider us to be. Thinking about how others see us and trying to make our image as attractive as possible is considered a kind of dissembling or cheating. . . . It's naive to believe that our image is only an illusion that conceals our selves, as the one true essence independent of the eyes of the world . . . our self is a mere illusion, ungraspable and indescribable, misty, while the only reality, all too easily graspable and describable, is our image in the eyes of others. And the worst thing about it is that you are not its master. First you try to paint yourself, then you want at least to influence and control it, but in vain: a single malicious phrase is enough to change you forever into a depressingly simple caricature. (*Immortality* 127)

With respect to the dialectic between living and seeing oneself live, between mastering our images and being mastered by them, we feel compelled to build our own text. Otherwise we take the chance of falling into the dilemma which can be categorized by Kundera's definition of fate: "there comes a moment when the image of our life parts company with the life itself, stands free, and, little by little, begins to rule us" (*Art of the Novel* 128).

The nature of our involvement as a reader is determined by Pirandello's ability in provoking us to identify with the conditions of the « sentimento del contrario ». Harrison writes,

> In opposition to the "common Lie" by which the reality principle enforces its univocal and monocular visions, Pirandello proposes an "explicit and declared tolerance of dissension and contrast" (*L'Umorismo* 155). In the aesthetics of perplexity "each image, each group of images evokes and attracts contrary ones, and these naturally divide the spirit, which, in its restlessness, is obstinately determined to find or establish the most astonishing relationships between the images" (*L'Umorismo* 141). (Harrison 207)

It is Pirandello's pen which draws us into this topsy-turvy world of odd wheelbarrows. It is Pirandello's humor that allows us to feel the revenge the lawyer experiences in that dictatorial act which somehow revenges his stolen

individuality. Who has not, on many occasions, pensively pondered acts which, to the realm of that conventional reality we all succumb to, would appear totally incommensurable. To say it with Pirandello,

> In certi momenti di silenzio interiore, . . . ci sentiamo assaltare da una strana impressione, come se, in un baleno, ci si chiarisse una realtà diversa da quella che normalmente percepiamo, una realtà vivente oltre la vista umana, fuori delle forme dell'umana ragione. (*L'umorismo* 160)

The disparity of behavioral codes cannot be required to bear the weight of rationalistic and conventional expectations and most certainly cannot fall silent to them. It is precisely to the alleviation of such heaviness that Pirandello has raised his pen and given an artistic voice, perhaps not always an operatic voice but certainly one that echoes and echoes and echoes.

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Notes

[1]Caputi 93. Caputi emphasizes the particular treatment of consciousness achieved in this play, a consciousness which was previously unparalleled in Pirandello's fiction and plays. Of innovative quality is the "stage-by-stage layering" of awareness reflecting the full state of consciousness.

[2]Croci xxvii. See the introduction by Giovanni Croci to Pirandello's *Uno, nessuno e centomila* for critical analysis of the active role Moscarda undertakes in treating the consciousness of his self-perceived images and the images perceived by others.

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The Entrance of Beatrice in Dante's *Purgatorio*: Revelation, Duality and Identity

In Cantos XXIX and XXX of his *Purgatorio*, Dante-poet sets up and then presents what has generally been considered to be the "climax" of his *Divina commedia*: Dante-pilgrim's long-awaited reunion with Beatrice. Of course the entire poem, from Canto I of the *Inferno*, has been in a sense a "set-up" leading to this moment, but in these cantos Dante, like any good showman, steps up and concentrates the sense of anticipation and of revelation, pushing them to the highest levels seen thus far in the poem.

Canto XXIX presents us with a pageant, a processional "masque," to use Dorothy Sayers' characterization (303), a sort of heavenly medieval *sacra rappresentazione*; yet this functions as a prologue, a ritual preparation or "warm up act" to the "main event" of Dante's meeting with Beatrice in Canto XXX, rather like the lavish ritualized processional that precedes a bullfight.

Fascinating as this procession is, with its rich visual symbolism and complex allegorical elements, I have chosen in this essay to focus on the first part of Canto XXX, the actual entrance of Beatrice, and Dante's initial contact with her: it is the moment in the poem when Dante's personal drama is suddenly and finally unveiled. With its direct appeal to the emotions and its dramatic effectiveness, it reveals elements of a modern "profane" drama in Dante in contrast to the sacred allegorical drama which has led us up to it.

Using this passage (approximately the first half of Canto XXX) I hope to investigate, with the help of a variety of commentators, how Dante's unique manipulations of language and poetic structure express the idea of transformation and the underlying theme of duality, which are so fundamental to this moment in the *Commedia*. Within this context I also wish to discuss the meaning of seeing or vision for Dante, as well as the issues of identity and personalization, issues which are crucial not only to this passage but to the entire poem.

The idea of Dante-pilgrim's transition in this part of the *Commedia* from a physical to a spiritual perception of his world (also seen as a transition from the realm of the rational to the realm of faith, or from a personal to a universal orientation) has been discussed by several commentators. Francis Fergusson

proposes that "the break between reason and faith, nature and the supernatural, comes with the flash of light" (185), referring to the moment in Canto XXIX when "un lustro subito trascorse/ da tutte parti per la gran foresta,/ tal che di balenar mi mise in forse" (16-18), and further characterizes the halting of the procession in front of Dante—the moment immediately prior to the start of Canto XXX—as "the point of intersection between time and eternity."[1] Similarly, in the commentary of Umberto Bosco and Giovanni Reggio, Dante's meeting with Beatrice is seen as a "rapporto (o 'ponte') tra umano e extra umano" (508).

Most commentators point to this sequence as the moment in which both the poem's protagonist and the poem itself undergo a transformation from a relationship to their universe as something physical, observable, recordable and rational to a new perception—or revelation—of that universe as something which can only be truly understood, truly "seen" on a spiritual, super-rational, extra-human (or "transhuman") and faith-based level. In verses 7 through 9 we are given one of the many figures of this kind of transformation: "la gente verace,/ venuta prima tra 'l grifone ed esso,/ al carro volse sè come a sua pace . . . ." In turning to the chariot (which variously figures the Church and the Advent of Christ) "as to their peace," the "truthful people" are accepting as theirs the will of God, just as Dante-pilgrim's free will "turns to" or is transformed into God's will. Moreover, the fact that the chariot is at this point physically empty, yet nevertheless is the focus of attention of the entire procession, visually expresses the concept of faith in the unseen. Dante-poet, up to this point an observer and reporter of all these events, will very soon become a participant, an inseparable part of the *racconto* on a profoundly personal level. He will become, in a way he has not been before, a character in his own drama.

Here the idea of transition can of course be read on another, theatrical level: as the first entrance of one character and the simultaneous final exit of another, the "changing of the guard" from Virgil to Beatrice. As Charles Singleton observes, Dante neatly expresses this transition in verse 21: "Manibus, oh, date lilïa plenis!" ["O, give me lilies with full hand!"]. On its literal level, Singleton notes, it is "an utterance of the welcoming angels," casting flowers for the arrival of Beatrice. Yet it is significantly a quote from Virgil's own *Aenied* (VI, 883), the context being "Anchises' prophecy of the premature death of the youth Marcellus" (Singleton 735). The sense of untimely demise parallels the sudden disappearance of Virgil from Dante's poem, giving the verse a dual significance as "both a farewell to Virgil and a welcome to Beatrice" (Singleton 740).

William Vernon, calling this "the choicest line in the choicest passage of Virgil's great work" goes so far as to "offer the opinion that this is the moment when Virgil vanishes . . ." (506). The search for such pinpoint precision (another commentator even defines the interpolated "oh" in the verse as the exact point

of Virgil's vanishing) clearly seems beside the point. What does seem significant about Virgil's exit is that it is not physically seen by Dante, but discovered after the fact, much as the precise moment of Beatrice's appearance is left somewhat ambiguous, occurring as it does "dentro una nuvola di fiori" (28), her presence being felt before it is actually seen.

If, to extend the theater analogy, we see the universe of Dante's *Commedia* as a great stage, then Virgil slips unnoticed offstage while our attention is cleverly diverted to the visual splendor of the "cloud of flowers" effect, which serves in turn to veil Beatrice's entrance. Dante-*commediografo* has carefully scripted his comedy so that his two guides never appear on stage at the same time (Beatrice's descent to Limbo to plead with Virgil to be Dante's guide is presented by Virgil as exposition, offstage "backstory"). Virgil's Reason cannot interact with Beatrice's Faith, nor is Virgil permitted to be present, even as a silent observer, at his disciple's moment of truth: Dante's penance—the truly hard part—is entrusted to Beatrice alone.

The last flickering vestige of Virgil's presence on this stage—just before the discovery of his final disappearance—is beautifully reflected in verse 48, "conosco i segni dell'antica fiamma," where Dante echoes in *volgare* another line from the *Aeneid*, in which Dido addresses Anna, saying "Adgnosco veteris vestigia flammae" (IV, 23). Like verse 21, this line serves the double function of a final tribute to Virgil and a signal of the awareness of Beatrice's entrance onto the scene. The dying flame of Virgil's Reason becomes the brightening one of Beatrice's Revelation.

The simultaneous exit and entrance, or farewell and welcome, is but one of the many expressions of a prevailing sense of duality that imbues this passage. Though the idea of duality is a presence throughout the *Commedia*, it seems heightened and intensified here, adding to the sense of this scene as a climax for the poem as a whole. Regarding the conception of time here, Fergusson has written:

> The movement of the procession gave us time in its passage: now, in the Griffon we get its end and transcendence. For the Incarnation is both the "point of intersection of time and eternity" and the end of time in another sense, the figure of the Second Coming and the Last Judgement. (186)

Time is thus seen in its dual nature: as something finite which comes to an end here, and as something infinite which can never know an end, and just as Virgil makes his exit to be replaced by Beatrice, so does measurable time leave the stage to be superseded by time as something beyond human power to measure or describe. Another aspect of the duality of time is seen in verses 34 through

42, where Dante makes reference to his two most important previous encounters with Beatrice, "gia cotanto/ tempo era stato . . ." (34-35) referring to the last time he laid eyes on her—ten years previously, at the age of twenty five—, and "prima ch'io fuor di püerizia fosse . . ." (42) to their first encounter, when Dante was only nine years old.

In these three tercets, then, two different "sightings" of Beatrice are evoked, in two separate pasts, and in both of them, as in the present vision, Dante was overcome with "stupor, tremando, affranto" (36). It is this strong personal emotion that links the three episodes, giving us a sense of past(s) and present being fused into a unity.

Elsewhere, this sense of the past in the present—this time the ancient past—is evoked in Dante's use of interpolations in Latin: Vernon (504n) and many other commentators have noted the Latin rhyme "senis/venis/plenis" in verses 17, 19 and 21; and Singleton has pointed out the choice of "patre/matre/atre" in verses 50, 52 and 54, suggesting a deliberate striving for a "more ancient sound" (741-42), as these words clearly echo the Latin forms "pater," "mater" and "ater" (the latter meaning "black" or "dark" in Latin). Moreover, these evocations of the Latin past are fittingly integrated into evocations of two different "pasts" of the *Commedia* itself: Dante's acceptance of Virgil's guidance in the early part of the *Inferno* (51), and the cleansing of his tear-darkened cheeks at the outset of the *Purgatorio* (53-54).

The technique a modern-day rapper would call "sampling" (inserting sound-bites copied from other sources—songs, quotes, pop culture miscellania—into one's music) was being employed centuries earlier by Dante in his experiments with the infant *volgare illustre*, though he extended and developed sampling to a rather higher level than our current versifiers have as yet achieved.

Significantly, two other instances of sampling serve as the loci for the expression of another kind of duality: the much commented upon duality of gender. In verse 11, Dante has one of the "gente verace" sing out "Veni, sponsa de Libano." Singleton notes the origin of this citation as the *Canticle of Canticles* 4:8, and further observes: ". . . our guiding expectation that Beatrice is the one who is to come is now further heightened by this call for a 'sponsa,' in the feminine" (730) Yet a few verses further on (19), we have the welcoming cry "Benedictus qui venis!" in the masculine. The source being sampled here is the scene of Christ's entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday in Matthew 21:4-9, and most commentators agree that it too is an allegorical reference to the imminent arrival of Beatrice. Yet the masculine gender stubbornly transposed from the original remains, in the understated words of John S. Carroll, "a difficulty" (quoted by Stambler 364n).

Commentators have confronted this difficulty in a variety of ways. Singleton proposes that Dante is presenting a "deliberate ambiguity" between the identities Beatrice-Christ, but the commentaries of Bosco-Reggio take a somewhat different position, saying that the masculine gender employed here "non prova altro che il carattere rituale dell'apparizione stessa e dei canti che l'accompagnano" (506). This view is echoed by J. S. P. Tatlock, who speaks of the "Benedictus" as "a cry of ceremonial welcome to great personages on earth" (quoted by Singleton 734). This idea that the welcome is meant to be taken in a ritual or generic sense—as opposed to a gender-specific one—seems to parallel the solution suggested by Dorothy Sayers, who cites the frequent use among the Provençal poets of "the masculine title 'midons'–my liege" in addressing ladies of superior rank and culture (quoted by Stambler 364n).

Cultural rationalizations notwithstanding, it seems to this reader that Singleton has come closest to the mark in suggesting that Dante wanted this incongruity to remain unresolved. By jogging our expectations of gender consistency, he forces the reader to perceive the problem differently, to look beyond the seeming duality of gender and into the possibility of a higher unity, thus reinforcing the process of the (in Fergusson's words) "turning, or conversion, of the soul, from the inward gaze to the upward gaze" (179). The difficulty encountered here then becomes a foreshadowing of and preparation for the difficulties of Beatrice's obscure language at the end of the canticle, as well as the cosmic complexities that will greet the reader in the *Paradiso*.

On the threshold of Beatrice's appearance (and the discovery of Virgil's disappearance), the ambiguities of gender and gender characteristics come thick and fast. In verses 43-44, Dante turns toward Virgil "col respitto/ col quale il fantolin corre a la mamma," yet refers to him in verse 50 as "Virgilio dolcissimo patre." The allusion to Virgil as a mother figure, followed by a paternal characterization, seems to mirror the ambiguities of the "sponsa" and "Benedictus" verses with respect to Beatrice. Furthermore, the sweetness of Virgil's paternal love seems to be set in contrast not only with the sins of Eve ("l'antica matre" of v. 52), but more importantly with the sternness of Beatrice, whose first words to Dante have a particular—and quite unexpected—sting.

Singleton lays particular emphasis on this sternness in his reading (740, 742), whereas other commentators read Beatrice's first words in a somewhat more equivocal light. Bosco and Reggio, while noting the "aspro rimprovero" of Beatrice's words, go on to assert that "il vocativo iniziale [the naming of Dante] è, nonostante tutto, segno di affetto" (516). This reading of a familial affection on Beatrice's part, an affection that will serve to soften the harshness of her subsequent diatribe, is echoed by Stambler, who refers to her "non piangere ancora" (56) with its "mixture of fostering love and minatory reproach" (259).

In the latter reading we can see more fullness, more "completeness" in Beatrice in relation to Virgil, for, though both of them have gender ambiguities clinging to them, Beatrice alone contains the opposing attributes "aspro/dolce," the duality of harshness and nurturing, within her being. Virgil's sweet incompletion must give way to Beatrice's "pietade acerba" (81), her "tough love," if you will, for this final leg of Dante's journey.

As we read further on into the canto we can see that Beatrice's severity appears less surprising when we consider it as a reaction to another incongruity: Dante's tears of grief at Virgil's loss, shed in the midst of all this Edenic bliss. As Stambler states, Dante "contravenes the law and quality of the place by being unable to be happy even here" (260). His tears represent the last obstacle, the last vestige of his attachment to a personal, human frame of reference. They stain, or "darken," his previous purgation (see v. 54) and thus represent a *colpa*, or flaw, in that purgation process. This *colpa* requires an instant counterbalancing, which is provided in the form of Beatrice's sternness. And yet this sternness reinforces the sense of duality here, creating a "paradiso problematico," or to quote Stambler again, "a feeling that the serpent still lurks somewhere in the garden" (259). The resolution of this duality can be achieved only through Dante's penance, which indeed begins here with his contrition. It is Dante's own *contrapasso*, the balancing of his sorrow with his sin (the "no pain, no gain" formula), which will take on an almost mathematical precision.

Since Dante's penance initiates another episode of his journey, it does not concern us here. There is still much to be said about the threshold to that final episode, and how it prefigures what is ultimately revealed there. Revelation, in its most fundamental significance, requires seeing, vision, and Dante in these verses has a good deal to tell us about the meaning of vision, in both its earthly-physical and its allegorical-divine senses.

At the very beginning of the canto, we are presented again with the image of the seven candles that initiated the procession: ". . . il settentrion del primo cielo/ che nè accaso mai seppe nè orto/ nè d'altra nebbia che di colpa velo" (1-3). As Stambler tells us,

> the Septentrion of the candles differs from the one visible to mankind [the Ursa Minor] in being not subject to rising or setting or in being veiled by any atmospheric disturbance—only sin [*colpa*] has acted as a veil to hide it from men. (256-57)

True vision, true clarity of sight, can occur only in the absence of sin, in a pure state.

Dante expresses this by juxtaposing the natural world (the stars which can be veiled by clouds) with the supernatural (the seven candles that are beyond the

rules of nature, yet can be veiled by man's sins). This image of a veil obscuring our true seeing is a crucial one, which will recur throughout the remainder of the canto. It serves as the fundamental visual expression of Dante's relationship to Beatrice here, the obstacle that only his penance can remove. Even the tears which darken Dante's cheeks in verses 53-54 can be read as a veil of sin coming from his own eyes, separating him from Beatrice and Revelation, for which indeed she will upbraid him in the following tercet.

In verses 22 through 33, this veiling metaphor is expressed in some of the most beautiful lines in the canticle, if not the entire poem. First we see a lovely roseate sunrise, watching "la faccia del sol nascere ombrata,/ sì che per temperenza di vapori/ l'occhio la sostenea lunga fiata" (25-27), then the metaphor is revealed as Beatrice appears "dentro una nuvola di fiori" (28) and behind yet another "candido vel" (31). Dante masterfully conveys the idea that, just as the sun needs to be veiled in order for the human eye to endure it, so is it necessary to temper the brightness of God, of divine truth, so that, in the words of Ottimo, "l'occhio, cioè l'intelletto umano possa, mediante la mistica e figurativa Scrittura, sofferire li raggi e la chiaritade della divina Scrittura" (cited by Vernon 508n).

In this observation, the veil metaphor is extended to include Dante's figurative language itself, the metaphor, allegory and other devices he utilizes to wrap this truth, this vision, in allusion and indirection. It would be difficult to find a more classic example of the use of allusion and indirection than the presentation of the entrance of Beatrice, the personification of this divine vision. The gradual lifting of the various physical, linguistic and cognitive veils is extended with elaborate subtlety and care over the entire first half of the canto. It is not until verse 73 that this lady behind the veils is explicitly self-identified as Beatrice, and even then she will not be completely visually unveiled to Dante's longing eyes until the end of the following canto. By contrast, the disappearance of Virgil is presented with a painful suddenness, and the sharp pang of tearful regret that Dante feels by having missed actually seeing Virgil's final exit is a fitting initiation to the penance he will now serve under Beatrice.

In both Virgil's exit and Beatrice's entrance, then, the physical faculty of sight is either lacking or impaired. Like the empty chariot, it is the thing **not** seen, or incompletely seen, which will take on enormous significance for both Dante and the reader. While the various veils that obscure Beatrice are, on a more literal level, obstacles to direct vision, they are also, on a deeper level, a means or a vehicle for allowing perception or awareness of the vision to take place at all in the imperfect human soul—or intellect—in Purgatory. By contrast, the souls of the sinners in the Inferno, being under the earth, are deprived of any vision of the divine truth whatsoever. Those on their way to achieving Paradise,

however, are motivated toward their salvation by this visual enticement, which will only become clear, direct vision at the completion of the purgation process.

The veiling, then, has a didactic function, and its effect on Dante can already be seen in verses 37 through 39, where his spirit "sanza de li occhi aver più conoscenza,/ per occulta virtù che da lei mosse,/ d'antico amor sentì la gran potenza." As Grandgent comments, ". . . before he sees [Beatrice's] features, Dante recognizes her by the love that fills him" (582). Ever the fast learner, Dante is already benefiting from the lesson of the veil, Beatrice's "occulta virtù," by **feeling** his "old love's great power" (Singleton's translation v.39, p. 329), rather than relying on his eyes alone for "conoscenza." In preparation for Paradise, he is developing higher ways of seeing as he begins to embrace the spiritual and metaphysical and let go of the merely physical and rational. Only with this new seeing can Dante's love for Beatrice be transformed into *agape*, the ethical, universal love which does not require a visible object (in the earthly sense) to be evoked, yet which provides the generating force necessary to lift him into the heavenly spheres.

This spiritual recognition of the lady behind the veil is confirmed in verse 55, when, at last, Beatrice speaks. There is virtually no commentator who has failed to take note of the highly significant fact that the first word Beatrice utters at this long-awaited moment is Dante's own name, and that it is moreover the first and only appearance of his name in the entire poem. Its positioning here seems designed for deliberate dramatic emphasis, even shock, and the debate on its significance has taken several different forms. Citing Dante's own subsequent reference to this self-naming "che di necessità qui si registra" in verse 63, Singleton notes:

> Dante's confession to Beatrice . . . in this canto and the next, is a **personal** confession. We are not to seek to read it as Everyman's. And this unique naming of Dante as the protagonist declares as much: such is its necessity. (743-44)

Thus the self-naming in Singleton's reading is used to separate the two Dantes in the reader's mind, to make a distinction between Dante-pilgrim, in his allegorical function, and Dante-poet, the individual whose personal confession we are about to hear.

The "necessità" is interpreted somewhat differently in the Bosco-Reggio commentaries. In the note to verse 63 they suggest that "Il nome qui è necessario forse anche per legare più strettamente la vicenda del Paradiso terrestre con quella terrena del suo amore" (Bosco-Reggio 517, n. 63). This view is supported in their introduction to the canto, where they discuss of the manner in which

> il privato e il terreno, restando tali, possano acquistare carattere universale e religioso. . . . [Dante] parte sempre dalla sua persona, per immediatamente trascenderla, . . . [e quindi risulta che] l'azione salvifica e la situazione biografica sono una cosa sola. (Bosco-Reggio 508)

These words are echoed in Fergusson's reading, where he asserts that Virgil's exit

> . . . reduces Dante to the immediate truth of his own being. And now, for the first and only time, Beatrice calls him by name, "Dante" (line 55), as though to wake him and us from the dream of the vision and the poem. Dante the pilgrim and Dante the mortal man are one. (187)

The sense of a joining of the two Dantes, of a duality being finally reconciled, which these readings reflect, seems to me stronger than the sense Singleton tries to convey of an intentional separation of the individual and the allegorical identities of Dante. It would be useful here to cite Dante's own *Convivio* for an elaboration on the "necessarie cagioni" for an author's self-naming. The first justification he gives is "quando sanza ragionare di sè grande infamia o pericolo non si può cessare" (I.ii.12), going on to cite the example of Boethius defending himself against "la perpetuale infamia del suo essilio." The second justification is when "grandissima utilitade ne segue altrui per via di dottrina" (I.ii.14), here illustrating his point with the example of Augustine in his *Confessions*. Applying this second reason, Dante's self-naming can be read as support of the claim to emblematic status of his personal story as recorded in the *Commedia*, a reading consonant with the idea of the resolution (and ultimate transcendence) of Dante's dual identity.

The self-ordaining and self-privileging inherent in this act of setting himself up as an exemplar has a flip side for Dante, for, as other commentators have observed, there is a distinct element of self-humiliation and shame in his self-naming. Mark Musa, refuting the suggestion that "the naming of the Pilgrim has a lofty, solemn significance suggesting a second baptism," maintains: "Most critics believe that Beatrice is naming him to his shame."[2] Indeed Grandgent's commentary supports this reading, observing that ". . . without this humiliating record of his identity, his confession—which is not merely an incident in the fiction bit also a real admission, before the world, of real sin - would have been incomplete" (582-83).

The act of recording one's name, and by extension the very act of writing becomes, for Dante, an act of penance, for by writing—his name, his story—Dante is, in a sense, forced to see himself. This idea of being forced to confront oneself, to one's shame, is moreover visually echoed further on when Dante casts

his eyes downward toward the river during Beatrice's rebuke, "ma veggendomi in esso, i trassi a l'erba,/ tanta vergogna mi gravò la fronte" (77-78).

Grandgent notes: "Contrition is caused by seeing our real selves" (586). The name that Dante-poet has written on the page will be there for himself and all readers to see, and the reflection of himself with which Dante-pilgrim is confronted is equally unavoidable. Both Dantes thus experience the impossibility of escape from the self, the inevitability of one's own identity and one's own shame.

As mentioned above, Dante, by breaking (or at least bending) the rules of rhetoric in naming himself, creates a deliberate effect: he dramatically thrusts the register of the poem into a much more immediate, modern, almost profane dimension. Yet instead of reducing the allegory to a purely personal drama, Dante succeeds in fusing the allegorical and the personal, in reconciling perhaps the most important duality of the poem: that of his own identity.

For when Dante-poet becomes a participant, a character in his own drama, the literary distance between poet and pilgrim ceases to be relevant to the reader. By giving this climactic moment what T.S. Eliot called "the greatest personal intensity in the whole poem" (263), Dante is allowing the reader a new access to the poem. It is as if the first person in this first-person narrative is finally being revealed to the reader, just as Beatrice is finally being revealed to Dante the author/protagonist. This revelation, in turn, allows us a kind of catharsis as we experience with Dante the tears of his contrition, his true purgation.

At the same time, the revelation wakes us, to recall Fergusson's characterization, as if from a dream. It is the dream not only of the poem, but in the words of the poet, "di nostra vita," ours and his. And the wakeful state in which we now find ourselves is one where the dualities are reconciled and transcended, where the past is the present, the father is the mother, and the pilgrim is the poet—prepared at last for Paradise.

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Notes

[1]Fergusson 187; though he appears to be quoting from an unidentified Charles Singleton essay.

[2]Musa 326. It is interesting to note that Beatrice speaks not only Dante's name, but Virgil's and her own as well (v. 73), all within the context of harsh rebuke and shame for Dante.

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